



This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

### Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

- + *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
- + *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
- + *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
- + *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

### About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at <http://books.google.com/>



## TRAVELS.

**VILLAGE LIFE IN EGYPT.** By **BAYLE ST. JOHN**,  
Author of "Two Years' Residence in a Levantine Family." 2 vols.  
post 8vo, 21s.

**TWO YEARS' RESIDENCE IN A LEVANTINE  
FAMILY.** By **BAYLE ST. JOHN.** Post 8vo, 9s.

**RAMBLES AND OBSERVATIONS IN NEW SOUTH  
WALES**, with Sketches of Men and Manners, Notices of the Aborigines, Glimpses of Scenery, and some Hints to Emigrants. By  
**JOSEPH PHIPPS TOWNSEND.** Post 8vo, 9s.

**WAYFARING SKETCHES AMONG THE GREEKS  
AND TURKS, AND ON THE SHORES OF THE DANUBE.**  
By **A SEVEN YEARS' RESIDENT IN GREECE.** Post 8vo, 9s.

**THE SHOE AND CANOE ; or, Pictures of Travel in the  
Canadas.** With twenty Illustrations on Steel, and four Maps. By  
**J. J. BIGSBY, M.D.** 2 vols. post 8vo, 24s.

**SIR JAMES BROOKE'S JOURNALS OF EVENTS IN  
BORNEO.** And the **EXPEDITION OF H.M.S. "DIDO," FOR  
THE SUPPRESSION OF PIRACY.** By Captain the Hon. **HENRY  
KEPPEL, R.N.** Continued to the Occupation of Labuan, by **WALTER  
K. KELLY.** Third Edition. With Maps and Views. 2 vols. 8vo, 32s.

**NOTES OF A JOURNEY FROM CORNHILL TO  
GRAND CAIRO.** By **MICHAEL ANGELO TITMARSH.** With a  
Coloured Frontispiece. Second Edition. Small 8vo, 6s.

**THE IRISH SKETCH-BOOK.** By **Mr. M. A. TITMARSH.**  
With numerous Engravings on Wood, from the Author's Designs.  
Second Edition. 2 vols. post 8vo, 14s.

**IRELAND, SCOTLAND, AND ENGLAND.** By **J. G.  
KOHL.** One vol. 8vo, 11s.

**AUSTRIA.** By **J. G. KOHL.** One vol. 8vo, 11s.

**RUSSIA.** By **J. G. KOHL.** With a Map. 11s.

**THE TARANTAS ; Travelling Impressions of Young Russia.**  
By **COUNT SOLLOGUE.** With Eight Illustrations. Fcap., cloth, 5s.

**TRAVELS IN THE STEPPES OF THE CASPIAN  
SEA, THE CRIMEA, THE CAUCASUS, &c.** By **XAVIER  
HOMMAIRE DE HELL,** Civil Engineer, Member of the Société Géo-  
logique of France.

WORKS PUBLISHED BY CHAPMAN AND HALL.

---

**LIFE IN MEXICO**, during a Residence of Two Years in that Country. By Madame CALDERON DE LA BARCA. 8vo, 11s.

**THE KING OF SAXONY'S JOURNEY THROUGH ENGLAND AND SCOTLAND**, in the year 1844. By Dr. C. G. CARUS, Physician to His Majesty. Translated by S. C. DAVISON, B.A. 8vo, 11s.

**A TOUR THROUGH THE VALLEY OF THE MEUSE**, with the Legends of the Walloon Country and the Ardennes. By DUDLEY COSTELLO. Numerous Woodcuts. Second Edition. Post 8vo, 14s.

**HIGHLANDS AND ISLANDS OF THE ADRIATIC**, including Dalmatia, Croatia, and the Southern Provinces of Austria. By A. A. PATON, Esq. With Maps and Illustrations. 2 vols. 8vo, 32s.

**SYRIA AND THE HOLY LAND**, popularly described. By WALTER K. KELLY. 180 Illustrations. 8vo, 8s. 6d.

**EGYPT AND NUBIA**, popularly described. By J. A. ST. JOHN. 125 Engravings. 8vo, 9s.

---

**NOVELS.**

**RUTH**. By the Author of "Mary Barton." 3 vols. (*Shortly.*)

**AGATHA'S HUSBAND**. By the Author of "The Head of the Family." 3 vols. (*Shortly.*)

**THE FORTUNES OF FRANCIS CROFT**. 3 vols. (*Shortly.*)

**REUBEN MEDLICOTT; OR, THE COMING MAN**. By M. W. SAVAGE, Author of "The Bachelor of the Albany," &c. 3 vols. post 8vo.

**THE BLITHEDALE ROMANCE**. By NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE. 2 vols. post 8vo, 21s.

**MY UNCLE THE CURATE**. By the Author of "The Bachelor of the Albany," &c. 3 vols. post 8vo.

**THE HEAD OF THE FAMILY**. By the Author of "Olive." 3 vols. post 8vo.

**OLIVE**. By the Author of "The Ogilvies." 3 vols. post 8vo.

**THE OGILVIES**. By the Author of "Olive," "The Head of the Family," &c. 3 vols. post 8vo.



600055920R

# AGATHA'S HUSBAND.

**a** *Novel.*



# AGATHA'S HUSBAND

A NOVEL.

BY THE AUTHOR OF  
"OLIVE," "THE HEAD OF THE FAMILY," &c.

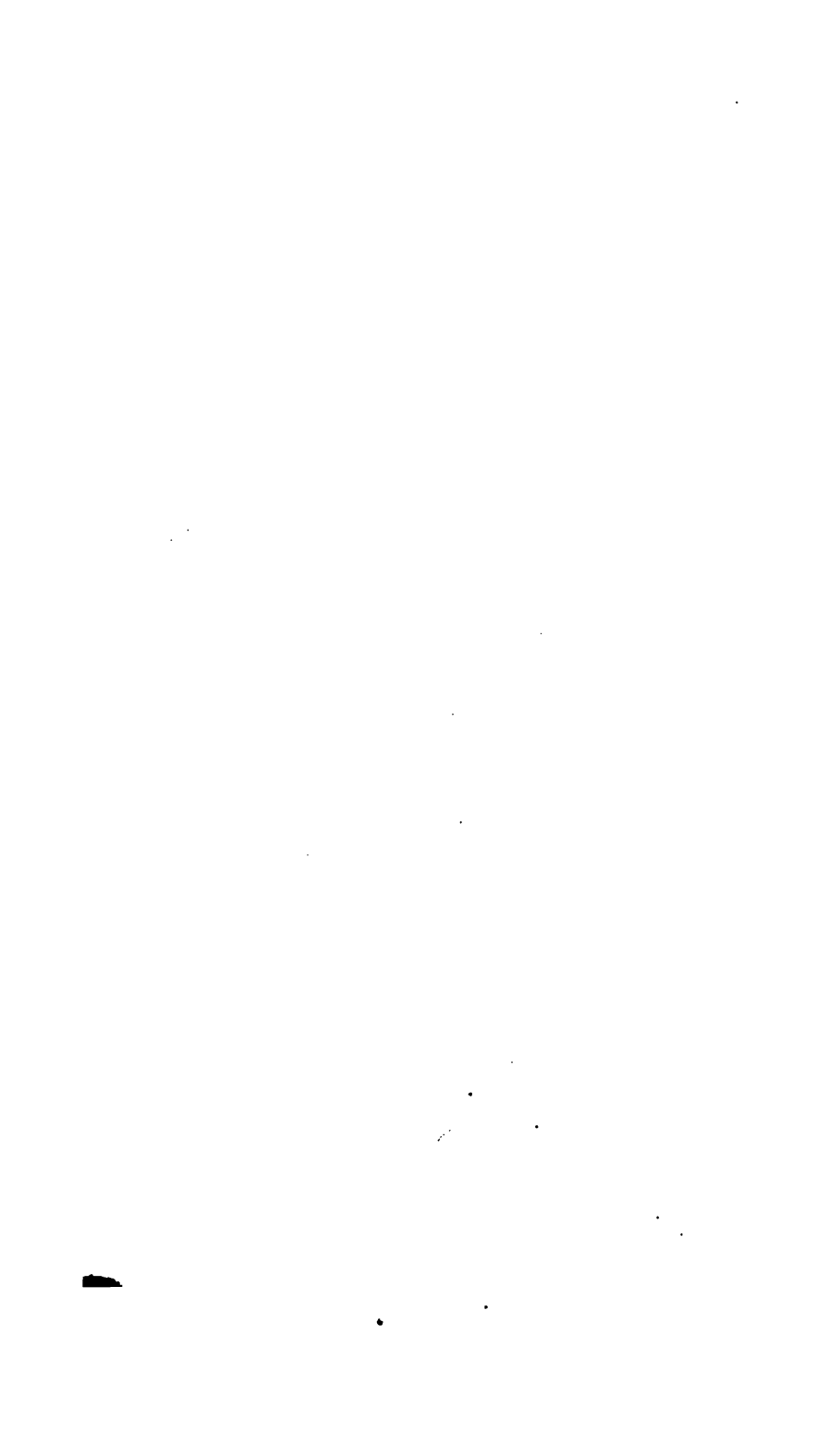
IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LONDON :  
CHAPMAN AND HALL, 193, PICCADILLY.  
1853.

249. w. 356.





# AGATHA'S HUSBAND.

---

## CHAPTER I.

“AND this is Dorsetshire ! What a sharp bleak wind !” said Agatha, shivering.

Her husband, who was driving her in a phaeton which had met them at the railway-station, turned to wrap a cloak round her.

“Except in the height of summer it is always cold across these moors. But we shall soon be safe at Kingcombe Holm. Are you very tired ?”

She answered “No,” which was hardly

the truth. Yet her heart was more weary than her limbs.

During the few days that elapsed between Major Harper's visit and their quitting London, she had scarcely seen her husband. He had been out continually, coming home to dinner tired and exhausted, though afterwards he always tried to talk and be cheerful. To her surprise, Major Harper never again called, nor, except in the brief answer to her question, "that Frederick was gone from home," did Nathanael ever mention his brother's name.

"This is Kingcombe," said Mr. Harper, as they drove through a little town, which Agatha, half blinded by the wind, scarcely opened her eyes to look at. "My sister, Mrs. Dugdale, lives here. I thought they might have met us at the station ; but the Dugdales are always late. Ah, there he is !"

•

"Who?"

"My brother-in-law, Marmaduke Dugdale—or 'Duke Dugdale,' as everybody about here calls him. Holloa, Duke!"

And Agatha, through her blue veil, "was ware," as old chronicles say, of a country-looking gentleman coming down the street in a mild, lazy, dreamy fashion, his hat pushed up at a considerable elevation from his forehead, leaving a mass of light hair straggling out at the back, his eyes bent thoughtfully on the pavement, and his hands crossed behind him.

"Holloa, Duke," cried Nathanael, for the second time, before he caught the attention of this very abstracted personage.

"Eh—is it you? You don't say so! E—h!"

Agatha was amused by the long, sweet-sounding drawl of the last monosyllable, which seemed formed out of all the five

vowels rolled into one. It was said in such a pleasant voice, with such a simple, child-like air of delighted astonishment, that Agatha, conquering her shyness at this first meeting with one of her husband's family, peeped behind Nathanael's shoulder at Mr. Dugdale.

She saw—what to her keen sense of beauty was a considerable shock—the very plainest man she had ever beheld in her life!

“Mr. Dugdale—my wife.”

“Indeed! Very glad to see her.” And Agatha, who was intending merely to bow, felt her hand buried in another thrice its size, which gave it a shy, gentle, but thoroughly cordial shake. “And really, now I think of it, I was coming to meet you. The Missus told me to do it.”

“How is ‘the Missus?’” asked Mr. Harper.

"Quite well—they're all waiting for you. So make haste—the Squire is very particular as to time, you know!"

Nodding to them both with a smile which diffused such an extraordinary light over the uncomely face that Agatha was quite startled and began to reconsider her first impression regarding it,—“Duke” Dugdale turned to walk on; but just as the horse was starting, came back again.

“Nathanael, you are here just in time—general election coming. You're a Free-trader, of course?"

“Why, I never thought much about the matter.”

“Eh!—What a pity! But we'll convert you, and you shall convert your father. Ah, yes—I think we'll get the Squire on our side at last. Good-by.”

“Who is ‘the Missus,’ and who is ‘the Squire?’” asked Agatha, as they drove off.

“ ‘The Missus’ is his wife—my sister Harriet, and ‘the Squire’ is my father,” said Nathanael, smiling. His face had worn a pleasant look ever since he caught sight of Duke Dugdale’s. “When I first came home I was as much amused as yourself at these queer Dorsetshire phrases, but I like them now; they are so simple and patriarchal.”

Agatha agreed; yet she could hardly help laughing. But though this brother-in-law of Mr. Harper’s—and she suddenly remembered that he was her own brother-in-law too—used provincial words, and spoke with a slight accent, a soft drawl which she concluded was “Dorset,”—though his dress and appearance had an anti-Stultzified, innocent, country look, still there was something about Marmaduke Dugdale which bespoke him unmistakeably the gentleman.

“I am glad we met him,” said Mr. Harper,

looking back down the street. "There he is, talking to a knot of people at the market-hall—farmers, no doubt, whom he will try to make Free-traders, and who would listen to him affectionately, even if he tried to make them Mahometans. The good soul! There isn't a better man in all Dorsetshire."

It was evident that Nathanael greatly liked "Duke Dugdale."

Agatha would have asked a score of questions about his age, which defied all guessing, and might have been anything from thirty to fifty-five—also about his "Missus," for he looked like a man who never could have made love, or thought of such a thing, in all his life. But her curiosity was restrained, partly by that of the old servant behind, who kept up a close though reverential observance of all the sayings and doings of "Ma-a-ester" Nathanael's wife.



She did not like even accidentally to betray how very little of Kingcombe her reserved husband had told her, and how she knew scarcely more of his family than their names.

Having parted from his brother-in-law, and gradually lost the benign influence which Duke Dugdale seemed to impart, Mr. Harper's face re-assumed that gravity, almost sadness, which, except when talking with herself, his wife now continually saw it wear.

They drove on, pushing against a fierce wind, that appeared like an invisible iron barrier to intercept their way. Every now and then Agatha could not help shivering and creeping closer to her husband ; whenever she did so, he always turned round and wrapped her up with most sedulous care.

“ It is a dreary day for you to see our county for the first time, Agatha. If the sun were shining, these wide bleak sweeps

of country would look all purple with heather, and that dun-coloured, gloomy range of hills—we must call them hills out of compliment, though they are so small—would stand out in a clear line against the sky. Beyond them lies the British Channel, with its grand sea-coast.”

“ The sea—ah ! always the sea.”

“ Nay, dear, don't be afraid, now don't'ee—as we Dorset people would say,” answered he, trying to make her smile. “ Kingcombe Holm lies in a valley. You would never know you were so near the ocean. It is the same at Anne Valery's house.”

“ Where is that ?” said Agatha, brightening up at the mention of the name.

“ Why, this animal seems inclined to show me—even if I did not know it of long habit,” answered Mr. Harper, bestowing a little less of his attention on his wife, and more on the obstreperous pony, who, in regard to a cer-

tain turn of the road, had grown peculiarly wrong-headed.

"Don't'ee give in, sir! T' Squire bought he o' Miss Valery, and she do gi 'un their own way, terrible bad," hinted the groom, with the peculiar Dorset fashion of ignoring accusative cases.

"Unfortunately, his own way happens to be a wrong one," said Nathanael, quietly, as he drew the reins tighter, and set himself to do that which it takes a very firm man to do—to conquer an obstinate and unruly horse. Agatha remembered what she had heard or read somewhere about such a case being no bad criterion of a man's character. "Lose your temper, and you'll lose your beast," ay, and perhaps your own life into the bargain. She was considerably frightened, but she sat quite still, looking from the struggling animal to her husband, in whose fair face the colour had risen, while the boyish

lips were set together with a will, fierce, rigid, and man-like. She could hardly take her eyes from him.

"Agatha, are you afraid? Will you descend?" asked he, suddenly.

"No—I will stay with you."

"Then I'll rule this creature. It is the right way, and he *must* go in it," said Nathanael, under his breath.

The struggle between man and brute lasted a minute or two longer, at the end of which, all danger being over, they were speeding on rapidly to Kingcombe Holm. Agatha sat very thoughtful.

"I fear," she said—when he tried to draw her out of her contemplative mood, showing her the wild furzy slopes and the fir-trees, almost the only trees that grow in this region—standing in black clumps on the hill-tops, like sentinel-ghosts of the old Romans, who

used to encamp there—"I fear you have made *me* as much in awe of you as you have the pony."

He smiled, and was quoting something about "love casting out fear," when he suddenly corrected himself, and grew silent. In that silence they swept on to the gates of Kingcombe Holm.

It was a place—more like an ancient manorial farm than a gentleman's residence—nestled snugly in one of those fairy valleys which are found here and there among the bleak wastes of Dorsetshire coast scenery—the richer for the barrenness of all around. Before and behind the house rose sudden acclivities, thick with autumn-tinted trees. On another side was a smooth, curving, wavy hill, bare in outline, with white dots of grazing sheep floating about upon its green. The Holm, with its garden and park,

.

lay on a narrow plane of verdurous beauty, at the bottom of the valley. Nothing was visible beyond it, save a long, bare, terraced range of hill, and the sky above all. There was no other habitation in sight, except a tiny church, planted on one acclivity, and two or three labourers' cottages, in the doors of which a few roly-poly, open-eyed children stood, poking their fingers in their mouths, and staring intensely at Agatha.

"Oh, what a delicious nest," she cried—overcome with excitement at her first view of Kingcombe Holm, where, however, there was not a creature visible but the great dog, that barked a furious welcome from the court-yard, and the peacock, that strutted to and fro before the blank windows, sweeping his draggled tail. "Are they at home, I wonder? Will they all be waiting for us?"

“ In the drawing-room, most likely. It is my father's way. He receives there all strangers—new comers, I mean. We shall see nobody till then.”

“ Don't be too sure of that, brother Nathanael,” said a quick, lively voice. “ So ho ! Duncce, hold still, do 'ee ! You used to be as precise as the Squire himself, bless his heart ! Now then, N. L. Jump down ! ”

The speaker of all this had come flying out of the hall-door—a vision of flounces, gaiety, and heartiness, had given the pony a few pats, or rather slaps, *en passant*, and now stood balancing herself on one of the spokes of the wheel, and leaning over into the carriage.

“ Is that you, Harrie ? Agatha, my sister Mrs. Dugdale.”

And Agatha found herself face to face (literally speaking, too, for “ Harrie ” kissed

her) with a merry-looking, pretty woman, of a style a little too *prononcée* perhaps, for her features were on a similar mould to Major Harper's. Still, there could be no doubt as to the prettiness, and the airy, youthful aspect—younger, perhaps, than her years. Agatha was perfectly astounded to find in this gay "Harrie" the wife of the grave and middle-aged Duke Dugdale!

"You see, my dear—ahem! what shall I call you?—that I can't be formal and polite, and it's no use trying. So I just left my father sitting stately in the drawing-room, with Mary on one side, as mistress of the household; Eulalie on the other, looking as bewitching and effective as she can, and both dying with curiosity to run out and see you. But I'm not a Miss Harper now; so, while they longed to do it, I—did it.



Here I am! Welcome home, Mrs. Locke Harper!"

"Thank you," stammered the young bride, hardly knowing whether to laugh or to cry. Her husband was scarcely less agitated than herself, but showed it only in the nervous trembling of his upper lip, and in the extreme brevity of his words. He lifted his wife down from the carriage, and Mrs. Dugdale, throwing back the blue veil, peered curiously into the face of her new sister.

"E—h!" she said, in that long musical ejaculation just like her husband—the only thing in which she was like him. Never was a pair who so fully exemplified the theory of matrimonial opposites. "E—h, Nathanael!" And her quick glance at her brother indicated undisguised admiration of "the Pawnee-face."

He himself looked restless, uncomfortable, as if his sister slightly fidgeted him ; she had indeed, with all her heartiness, a certain quicksilverishness of manner, jumping here there and everywhere like mercury on a plate, in a fashion that was very perplexing at first to quiet people.

"Come along, my dear," continued Harrie, tucking the young wife under her arm—"come and beautify a little—the Squire likes it. And run away to your father, N. L., my boy!" added she to her younger brother—younger—as a closer inspection of her fresh country face showed—possibly by some five or six years.

Mr. Harper assented with as good a grace as he could, and resigned his wife to his sister.

For the next ten minutes Agatha had a confused notion of being taken through many rooms and passages, hovered about by

Mrs. Dugdale, her flounces, and her lively talk—of trying to answer a dozen questions per minute, and being so bewildered that she succeeded in answering none, save that she had met Mr. Dugdale—that she did *not* think him “a beauty,” and (she hastily and in terror added this fact) that there was not the least necessity for his being so.

“Not the least, my dear. I always thought the same! You’ll love him heartily in a week—I did! Bless him for a dear, good, ugly, beautiful old soul!”

Here Agatha, who stood listening, and nervously arranging the long curls that *would* fall uncurled and untidy, felt a renewal of her old girlish enthusiasm for all true things; her eyes brightened, and her heart warmed towards “Harrie.” She would have liked to stay talking longer, but for a vision of Mr. Harper waiting uncomfortably downstairs.

"So you have finished adorning, and want to go! You can't bear to be ten minutes away from your husband, that's clear! Well, my-dear, you'll get wiser when you've been married as long as I have. But I don't know," added Mrs. Dugdale, laughing; "I'm always glad enough to get rid of Duke for an hour or two; yet somehow, when he is away, I'm always wanting him. By-the-by, did he happen to say what time he was coming over here—only to see you, you know? He has quite enough of 'the Missus.' "

Agatha laughingly asked how long "the Missus" had borne that title.

"Couldn't possibly count! Look at Gus and Fred in jacket and trousers, and little Brian learning to ride. Frightful antiquity! And yet when I married I was a girl like you; only ten times wilder—the greatest harum-scarum in the county! I often wonder

poor Duke was not afraid to marry me! Heigho! Well, here we are down-stairs, and here—take your wife, most solemn brother Nathanael! If you were but a little more like Frederick! By the way, have you seen Fred lately?”

“He has left town,” said Mr. Harper, shortly, as he drew his young wife’s arm through his own, and led her to his father’s presence.

Agatha was conscious of a tall, thin, white-haired gentleman—not unlike Major Harper frozen into stately age—who rose and came to meet her.

“I am most happy to welcome my son’s wife to Kingcombe Holm.”

Agatha felt the withered fingers touching her own—the kiss of welcome formally sealed on her forehead. She trembled exceedingly for a moment, but recovered herself, and met old Mr. Harper’s keen ob-

servant gaze with one as clear and as composed as his own. One glance told her that he was not the sort of man into whose fatherly arms she could throw herself, and indulge the emotion brimming over in her heart. But his examination of her was evidently favourable.

“ You are most welcome, believe me. And my daughters”—here he turned to two ladies, of whom Agatha at first distinguished nothing, save that one was very pretty, the other much older, and plain—“ my daughters, receive your new sister.” Here the ladies aforesaid approached and shook hands, the plain one very warmly.—“ You also can tell her how truly glad we are to receive—*Mrs. Harper.*”

He hesitated a little before the latter word, and pronounced it with some tremulousness, as though the old man were thinking how

many years had passed since the name " Mrs. Harper " had been silent at Kingcombe Holm.

His daughters looked at one another—even Harriet observing a grave respect. No one spoke, or took outward notice of the circumstance ; but from that time the subject of much secret conjecture was set at rest, and Agatha became, to all intents and purposes, " Mrs. Harper."

During the somewhat awkward quarter of an hour that followed, in which the chief conversation was sustained by " the Squire," and occasionally by Nathanael—Mrs. Dugdale having vanished—the young girl observed her two sisters-in-law. Neither struck her fancy particularly, perhaps because they were women of the mild uniformity often belonging to the female branches of " county families," vegetating on their estates

from generation to generation ; also, because Agatha was invariably very hard to please. Of the two she liked Mary best ; for there was great good-nature shining through her fearless plainness—a sort of placid acknowledgment of the fact that she was born for usefulness, not ornament. Eulalie, on the contrary, carried in her every gesture a disagreeable self-consciousness, which testified to her thorough and long-practised assumption of that dangerous character—the beauty of the family. Despite Agatha's admiration of handsome women in general, she and the youngest Miss Harper eyed one another uncomfortably—two opposite characters, who, compelled to outward association, feel sure from the first that they shall never mingle.

All this while Nathanael spoke but little to his wife ; apparently leaving her to nestle down at her own will among his



family. But he kept continually near her, within reach of a word or glance, had she given either ; and she more than once felt his look of grave tenderness reading her very soul. She could not think why, in spite of all his efforts to the contrary, he should be at heart so serious, while she was quite ready to be happy and at ease.

There was one thing, however, which gave her keen satisfaction—the great honour in which her husband was evidently held by his family.

Very soon a heterogeneous post-prandial repast was announced for the benefit of the travellers ; to which Mr. Harper graciously bade them retire—even leading his daughter-in-law to the dining-room door.

“ He'll not come further in,” whispered Mrs. Dugdale, who made herself most active about Agatha. “ You arrived at seven, and my father would as soon think of changing

his six o'clock dinner-hour, as he would of changing—his politics ; for all Duke says to the contrary."

Agatha was not sorry, since the idea of dining under the elaborate kindness and dignified courtliness of old Mr. Harper was rather alarming. Besides, she was so hungry !

The moment her father-in-law had closed the door, the sisters came gathering like bees round herself and her husband, Mary busy over every possible physical want, Harrie, sitting at, or rather on the table. She had a wild and not ungraceful way of throwing herself about — rattling on like a very Major Harper in petticoats, and flinging away *bon mots* and witty sayings enough to make the fortune of many a "wonderfully clever woman,"—the very last character which this light-spirited country-lady would probably have imagined

her own. For Eulalie, she had relaxed into a few words, and fewer smiles, the quality of neither being of sufficient value to make one regret the quantity. Nobody minded her much but Mary, who was motherly, kind, and reverential always to the inane beauty.

Such were Agatha's first impressions of her new sisters. With a shyness not unnatural she had taken little notice of her husband. He had chatted among his sisters, with whom he seemed very popular; but always in the intervals of talk the pale, grave, tired look came over him.

In quitting the dining-room—where Agatha, irresistibly led on by Mrs. Dugdale's pleasantness, had begun to feel quite at home, and had laughed till she was fairly tired out—he said, in a half whisper:

“Now, dear, I think we ought to go and see Elizabeth.”

In the confusion of her arrival, Agatha had forgotten that there was another sister—in truth the Miss Harper of the family—Mary, its head and housekeeper, being only “Miss Mary.” She noticed that as Nathanael spoke, the other three looked at him and herself doubtfully, as if to inquire how much she knew—and anxiously, as though there were something painful and uncomfortable in a stranger’s first seeing Elizabeth.

Mrs. Harper felt her cheeks tingle nervously; but still she put her arm in her husband’s, and said, “I should much like to go.”

Mary sent for lights, and prepared to accompany them herself, the other two moving silently away into the drawing-room.

Through the same sort of old-fashioned passages, but, as it seemed, to quite a different part of the house, Agatha went with her husband and his sister. The strangeness

and gloom of the place, the doubt as to what sort of person she was going to see—for all she had heard was that from some physical suffering Elizabeth never quitted her room—made the young girl feel timid, even afraid. Her hand trembled so that her husband perceived it.

“Nay, you need not mind,” he whispered. “You will see nothing to pain you. We all dearly love her, and I do believe she is very happy—poor Elizabeth!”

As he spoke Mary opened a door, and they passed from the dark staircase into a large, well-lighted, pleasant room—made scrupulously pleasant, Agatha thought. It was filled with all sorts of pretty things, engravings, statuettes, vases, flowers, books, a piano; even the paper on the walls and the hangings at the window were of most delicate and careful choice. No rich drawing-room could show more taste in its

arrangements, or have a more soothing effect on a mind to which the sense of æsthetic fitness is its native element.

At first, Agatha thought the room was empty, until, lying on a sofa—though so muffled in draperies as nearly to disguise all form—she saw what seemed the figure of a child. But coming nearer, the face was no child's face. It was that of a woman, already arrived at middle age. Many wrinkles seamed it; and the hair surrounding it in soft, close bands, was quite grey. The only thing notable about the countenance was a remarkable serenity, which in youth might have conveyed that painful impression of premature age often seen in similar cases, but which now in age made it look young. It was as if time and worldly sorrow had alike forgotten this sad victim of Nature's unkindness—had passed by and left her to keep

something of the child's paradise about her still.

This face, and the small, thin, infantile-looking hands, crossed on the silk coverlet, were all that was visible. Agatha wondered she had so shrunk from the simple mystery now revealed.

Nathanael led her to the sofa, and placed her where Elizabeth could see her easily without turning round.

"Here is my wife! Is she like what you expected, sister?"

The head was half raised, but with difficulty; and Agatha met the cheerful, smiling, loving eyes of her whom people called "poor Elizabeth." Such thorough content, such admiring pleasure as that look testified! It took away all the painful constraint which most people experience on first coming into the presence of those whom Heaven has

afflicted thus; and made Agatha feel that in putting such an angelic spirit into that poor distorted body, Heaven had not dealt hardly even with Elizabeth Harper.

"She is just like what I thought," said a voice, thin, but not unmusical. "You described her well. Come here and kiss me, my dear new sister."

Agatha knelt down and obeyed, with her whole heart in the embrace. Of all the greetings in the family, none had been like this. And not the least of its sweetness was that her husband seemed so pleased therewith, looking more like himself than he had done since they entered his father's doors.

They all sat down and talked for a long time, Elizabeth more cheerfully than any. She appeared completely versed in the affairs of the whole family, as though her



mind were a hidden gallery in which were daguerreotyped clearly, and faithfully retained, all impressions of the external world. She seemed to know everybody and everybody's circumstances—to have ranged them and theirs distinctly and in order, in the wide, empty halls of her memory, which could be filled in no other way. For, as Agatha gradually learned, this spinal disease, withering up the form from infancy, had been accompanied with such long intervals of acute physical pain as to prevent all study beyond the common acquirements of her sex. It was not with her, as with some, that the intellect alone had proved sufficient to make out of a helpless body a glorious and complete human existence ; Elizabeth's mind was scarcely above the average order, or if it had been, suffering had stifled its powers. Her only possession was the loving heart.

She asked an infinitude of questions, her bright quick eyes seeming to extort and gain more than the mere verbal answers. She talked a good deal, throwing more light than Agatha had ever before received on the manners, characters, and history of the Harper family, the Dugdales, and Anne Valery. But there was in her speech a certain reticence, as though all the common gossip of life was in her clear spirit received, sifted, purified, and then distributed abroad in chosen portions as goodly and pleasant food. She seemed to receive the secrets of every one's life, and to betray none.

Agatha now learnt why there had been such a mystery of regret, reverence, and love hanging over the very mention of the eldest Miss Harper.

When the tumult of this strange day had resolved itself into silence, Agatha, believing

her husband fast asleep, lay pondering over it, wondering why he had not asked her what she thought of his family—wondering, above all, what was the strange weight upon him which he tried so hard to conceal, and to appear just the same to every one, especially to her. Her coming life rose up like a great maze, about which all the characters now apparently mingled therein wandered mistily in and out. Among them, those which had gained most vivid individuality in a fancy not prone to catch quick interests, affecting her alternately with a sense of pensive ideal calm, and cheerful healthy human liking, were Elizabeth Harper, “the Missus,” and Duke Dugdale.

Likewise, as an especial pleasure, she had discovered that one to whom she clung as to a well-known friend among all these strangers, lived within eight miles of Kingcombe Holm.

“And”—she kept recurring to a fact spread abroad in the house just before bedtime, and apparently diffusing universal satisfaction —“ and Anne Valery is sure to be here to-morrow.”

## CHAPTER II.

ON the morning—her first morning at Kingcombe Holm—Mrs. Harper woke refreshed to a bright day. All the terraced outline of the hills was pencilled distinctly against the bluest of blue skies, which hung like a tent over the shut-up valley. She stood at the window looking at it, while Mary Harper made the breakfast, and Eulalie curiously examined Agatha's dress, supposed to be the latest bridal fashion from London. Nathanael sat writing letters until breakfast was ready, and then took his father's place at the foot of the table.

“Elizabeth bade me ask you,” said Mary,

addressing him, "if you had any letters this morning from Frederick? You know she likes to look at all family letters—they amuse her. Shall I take this one?"

Nathanael put his hand upon a heap, among which was plainly distinguishable Major Harper's writing, "No, Mary—not now. If necessary, I will read part of it to Elizabeth myself."

Agatha, who had before vainly asked the same question, was annoyed by her husband's reserve. His silence in all his affairs, especially those relating to his brother, was impenetrable.

But this was rousing in her, day by day, a strong spirit of opposition. She would now—except that the presence of his sisters restrained her, for her external wifely pride grew as much as her inward antagonism—have again boldly put forward her claim to read the letter. As it was, she had self-

control enough to sit silent, but her mouth assumed that peculiar expression which at times revealed a few little mysteries of her nature—showing that beneath the quietude and simplicity of the girl lay the fierce, strong, desperate will of a resolute woman.

After breakfast, when Mr. Harper, with some slight apology, had gone to his letters again, she rose, intending to stroll about and explore the lawn. She had never been used to ask any one's permission for her out-goings and in-comings, so was departing quite naturally, when Mary stopped her.

"I hope you will not mind it, but we always stay in the house until my father comes down-stairs. He likes to see us before he begins the day."

Agatha submitted—with a good grace, of course; though she thought the rule absolute was painfully prevalent in the Harper family. But as half an hour went by, and the morning

air, so fresh and cool, tempted her sorely, she tried to set aside this formal domestic regulation.

Mary looked quite frightened at her overt rebellion.—“My dear Mrs. Harper—indeed we never do it. Do we, Nathanael?” said she, appealingly.

He listened to the discussion a moment.—“My dear wife, since my father would not like it, you will not go, I know.”

The tone was gentle, but Agatha—nay, any woman not gifted with wilful obstinacy—would as soon have thought of overleaping a stone wall as of opposing such a desire. She sat quietly down again—or would have done so, but that she saw Eulalie smile meaningly at her sister. Intercepting the young wife, the smile changed into underhand condolence.

“Nathanael will have his way, you see. If you only knew what he was as a little boy,”



and the Beauty shrugged her shoulders pathetically. "Really, as Harrie says, most men would never get wives at all, did their lady-loves know them only half as well as their sisters do."

"Nay," said the good-natured Mary, "but Harrie also says that men, like wine, improve with age, especially if they are kept cool and not too much shaken up. She has no doubt that even her Duke was a very disagreeable boy. So, Mrs. Harper, let me assure you—"

"There is no need; I am quite satisfied," said Mrs. Harper, with no small dignity; and at this momentous crisis her father-in-law entered the room.

He entered dressed for riding—looking somewhat younger than the night before, more cheerful and pleasant too, but not a whit less stately. He saluted Agatha first, and then his daughters, with a gracious solemnity, patting their cheeks all

round, something after the fashion of a good-humoured Eastern bashaw. The old gentleman evidently took a secret pride in his women-kind. Then he shook hands with "my son Nathanael," and threw abroad generally a few ordinary remarks, to which his two daughters listened with great reverence. But in all he did or said was the same benignant hauteur; he seemed frozen up within a conglomerate of reserve and formal courtesy; he walked, talked, looked perpetually as Nathanael Harper, Esquire, of Kingcombe Holm, who never allowed either his mind or his body to appear *en déshabille*. Agatha wondered how he could ever have been a baby squalling, a boy playing, or a young man wooing; nay, more (the thought irresistibly presented itself as she noticed the extreme feebleness which his dignity but half disguised), how he would ever stoop to the last levelling of

all humanity—the grave-clothes and the tomb.

“Any letters, my dear children? Any news to tell me before I ride to Kingcombe?” said he, looking round the circle with a patronising interest, which Agatha would scarcely have believed real, but for the kindly expression of the old man’s eye.

“There were plenty of letters for Elizabeth, as usual; one for Eulalie”—here Eulalie looked affectedly conscious—“no others, I think.”

“Except one to Nathanael from Frederick,” observed the Beauty.

At the name of his eldest son the Squire’s mien became a little graver—a little statelier. He said coldly, “Nathanael, I hope you have pleasant news from your brother. Where is he now?”

“In the British Channel, on his way to the Continent.”

"My son going abroad, and I never heard of it! Some mistake, surely. He is not really gone?"

"Yes, father, for a year, or perhaps more—but certainly a year."

The old gentleman's fingers nervously clutched the handle of his riding-whip. "If so, Frederick would certainly have shown his father the respect of informing *him* first. Excuse me if I doubt whether my son's plans are quite decided."

"They are indeed, sir," said Nathanael gently. "And I was aware of, indeed advised this journey. He bids me explain to you that when this letter arrives he will be already gone."

The father started—and broke the whip he was playing with. He stood a minute, the dull red mounting to his temples and lying there like a cloud. Then he took the fragments of the riding-whip from his

son's ready hand—thanked him—bade good morning to the women-kind all round, and left them.

“Shall I ride with you, father?” said Nathanael, following him to the hall-door, with a concerned air.

“Not to-day—I thank you! Not to-day.”

Mary and Eulalie looked at one another. “This will be a sad blow to papa,” said the former. “Frederick was always a great anxiety to him.”

Agatha inquired wherefore?

“Because papa abhors a gay ‘vagabondising’ life, and always wished his eldest son to settle down in the county. I know—though he says nothing—that this has been a sore point between them for nearly twenty years.”

“And I know,” added Eulalie, mysteriously, “that papa was going to make a last effort, and have Frederick proposed as

member for Kingcombe. A pretty fight there would have been—papa and Frederick against Marmaduke and his pet candidate!"

"'Tis well that is prevented! Everything happens for the best," said Mary, sagely. "But here comes Nathanael. Don't tell him, Mrs. Harper, or he would say we had been gossiping."

Mrs. Harper was standing moralising on the ins and outs of family life, from which her own experience had hitherto been so free. Her eyes were wandering up the road, where her father-in-law had just disappeared, riding slowly, but erect as a young man. While she looked, there came up one of those delicious little country pony-carriages, which a lady can drive and make herself independent of everybody.

"It is Anne Valery!" was the general cry, as all ran to meet her at the door—Agatha being the first.

“My dear—my dear!” murmured Anne Valery, leaning out of her little carriage to pat the brown curls. “Are you quite well?—quite happy? And your husband?” She glanced from one to the other, with a keen inquiry. “Is all well, Nathanael?”

Nathanael, smiling at his wife, whose look of entire pleasure brought, as usual, the reflection of the same to him also, answered, warmly, “Yes, Anne, all is well!”

She seemed satisfied, and took his hand to dismount from her carriage. Agatha noticed that she walked more feebly, in spite of the bright colour which the wind had brought to her cheeks; and that soon after she came into the house this tint gradually faded, leaving her scarcely even so healthy-looking as she had appeared a month ago—the last time they had seen her. But her talk was full of cheerfulness.

“I am come to stay the whole day with

you, by your father's desire—and my own. May I, Mary?"

"Oh, yes! We shall be so glad, especially Elizabeth, who was wondering and longing after you."

"I have not been well. London never suits me," said Anne, carelessly. "But come, now I am about again let me see what is to be done to-day. In the first place, a long talk with Elizabeth. Is she risen yet, Eulalie?"

Eulalie did not know; but Mary added, that she feared this was one of Elizabeth's "hard days," when she could not talk much to any one till evening.

Anne continued, after a pause, during which all had looked grave—"I want to drive over to Kingcombe about some business. I have had so much on my hands since poor Mr. Wilson's death."

"Anne's steward," whispered the Beauty



importantly to her sister-in-law. "Don't you know that half Kingcombe belongs to Anne Valery?" And Agatha noticed, with some amusement, what an extreme deference was infused into the usually nonchalant, contemptuous manner of the youngest Miss Harper.

"So poor Wilson is dead! And who have you to manage all your property?" asked Mr. Harper suddenly.

"No one at present. I am very particular in my choice. As I am only a woman, my steward has necessarily considerable influence. I would wish him always to be what Mr. Wilson was, if possible a friend, but undoubtedly a gentleman."

As Miss Valery spoke, Nathanael listened in deep thought; then meeting her eyes, he coloured slightly, but quickly recovering himself, said, in a low tone, "Some time to-day, Anne, I would like to have a little talk with you."

She assented with an inquiring look. But she seemed to understand Nathanael well enough to content herself with that look, asking no further questions.

“And, for the third important business which should be done to-day, and perhaps the sooner the better, I must certainly take Agatha up Holm Hill, and show her the view of the Channel.”

Agatha drew back from the window. “Ah, not the sea!—I cannot bear the sea.” Anne Valery watched her with peculiar earnestness.

“Were you ever on the sea, my dear?”

“Once, long ago.” And the fancy which Agatha had already confessed to her husband returned strongly; until Anne smiled, and then the likeness entirely vanished.

“Nay, I must teach you to admire our magnificent coast. On with your bonnet, and come and walk along that great hill-terrace—do you see it?—with Nathanael and me.”

“But you will be tired,” Mrs. Harper

said, reluctant still, yet loth to resist Anne Valery.

“Tired? no! The salt breeze gives me strength—health. I hardly live when I am not in sight of the Channel. Make haste, and let us go, Agatha.”

She seemed so eager, that no further objection was possible. So they soon started—they three only, for Mary had occupation in the house, and the Beauty was mightily averse to exercise and sea-air.

They climbed the steep road, overhung with trees, at whose roots grew clusters of large primrose-leaves, showing what a lovely walk it must be in spring; then higher, till all this vegetation ceased, leaving only the short grass cropped by the sheep, the purple thistles, and the furze-bushes, yellow and cheerful all the year round. It was not a long walk, for they were always in sight of Kingcombe Holm. Miss Valery talked gaily the whole way, only occasionally

sitting down to rest ; and, as though the sea-breeze truly gave her life, was the very first to reach the hill-top, and catch the earliest glimpse of the Channel.

“There !” she said, breathlessly, and quitting Mr. Harper’s arm, crossed over to his wife. “There, Agatha !”

It was such a view as in her life the young girl had never beheld. They stood on a high ridge, on one side of which lay a wide champaign of moorland, on the other a valley, bounded by a second ridge, and between the two sloping greenly down, till it terminated in a little bay. Parallel to the valley ran this grand hill-terrace—until it likewise reached the coast, ending abruptly in precipitous gigantic cliffs, against which the tides of centuries might have beat themselves in vain. Beyond all, motionless in the noon-day dazzle, and curving itself away in a mist of brightness where the eye failed, was the great, wide, immeasurable sea.

The three stood gazing, but no one spoke. Agatha trembled, less with her former fear than with that awe-struck sense of the infinite which is always given by the sight of the ocean—that ocean which ONE “holdeth in the hollow of his hand.” Gradually this awe grew fainter, and she was able to look round her, and count the white feathery dots scattered here and there on the dazzling sheet of waves.

“There go the ships,” said Nathanael. “See what numbers of them—numbers, yet how few they seem!—are moving up and down on this highway of all nations. Look, Agatha, at that one, a mere speck, dipping in the horizon. Do you remember Tennyson’s lines?—they reached Uncle Brian and me even in the wild forests of America :

“ ‘ Fresh as the first beam glittering on a sail  
Which brings our friends up from the under world;  
Sad as the last which reddens over one  
That sinks, with all we love, below the verge.’ ”

“There ! it is gone now,” cried Agatha,

almost with a pang of loss. She felt Anne Valery's fingers tighten convulsively over her arm, and saw her with straining eyes and quivering lips watching the vanishing—nay, vanished—ship, as if all her soul were flying with it to the “under world.”

The sight was so startling, so moving—especially in a woman of Miss Valery's mature age and composed demeanour—that Nathanael's wife instinctively turned her eyes away and kept silence. In a minute or two Anne had moved back to Mr. Harper's arm, and the three were walking on as before; until, ere long, they nestled themselves in a sheltered nook, where the sea-wind could not reach them, and the sun came in, warm as summer.

Nathanael began to show his wife the different points of scenery—especially the rocky Island of Portland, beyond which the line of coast sweeps on ruggedly westward to the Land's End.

"But I believe," he said, "that there is nowhere a grander coast than we have here—not even in Cornwall."

"Speaking of Cornwall," Miss Valery said, closely observing Nathanael, "I lately heard a sad story about some mines there."

Mr. Harper seemed restless.

"The speculation had failed, having been ill-managed, or, as I greatly fear, a cheat from the beginning. As I had property near in the county—what, did you not know that, Nathanael?—I was asked to do something for the poor starving miners of Wheal Caroline. Have you heard the name, Agatha?"

"No," said Agatha, innocently, not paying much attention, except to the lovely view.

"Not heard? That is strange. But you, Nathanael——"

"I know all," he said hastily. "It is a sad history—too sad to be talked of here. Another time——"

His eye met hers—and both turned upon

Agatha, who sat a little apart, enjoying the novel scene, and rejoicing above all that the sea—vague object of nameless terror—could ever appear so beautiful.

“Poor child!” murmured Miss Valery.

“Hush, Anne!” the husband whispered, imploringly—nay, commandingly. Anne was startled at the expression, so new to the young man’s face.

“How like you are to——”

“What were you saying?” asked Agatha, turning at last.

“I was saying,” Anne replied hastily—  
“I was saying how like Nathanael looked just then to his Uncle Brian.”

“Did he indeed? Was that all you were speaking of?”

“Not quite all; but I find your husband knows the story; he will tell you, *as he ought*,” added Anne, pointedly.

“Surely I will, one day,” said Nathanael.  
“But in this case, as in many others, where



there has been misfortune or wrong, I consider the best, wisest, most charitable course is not to spread it abroad until the wrong has had a chance of being remedied. Do you not think so, Anne?"

"Yes," she answered, her eyes fixed upon the resolute young face that seemed compelling her to silence almost against her will. It was marvellous to see the influence Nathanael had, even over Anne Valery.

"And now," continued Mr. Harper, "while I am alone with you and my wife"—here he drew Agatha within the circle of talk, and made her lean against his knee, his arm shielding her from the wind—"I wanted to talk with you, Anne, about some plans I have."

"Say on."

"I have given up—as Agatha wrote you word—all idea of our settling at Montreal. It is necessary that I should at once find some employment in England."

"Not yet—not just yet," said his wife.

"I must, dear. It is right—it is necessary. Anne herself would say so."

Miss Valery assented, much to Agatha's surprise.

"The only question then is—what can I do? Nothing in the professions—for I have acquired none; nothing in literature—for I am not a genius; but anything in the clear, straightforward, man-of-business line—Uncle Brian used to accuse me of being so very practical.—Anne," he added, smiling, "I wish, instead of my having to puff off myself thus, Uncle Brian were here to advertise my qualifications."

"Qualifications for what?" inquired Agatha, Miss Valery being silent.

"For obtaining from my friend here what I would at once have applied for to any stranger; poor Wilson's vacant post, as her overseer, land-agent, steward, or whatever the name may be."

“Steward!” cried Mrs. Harper, perfectly horrified at the word. “Surely you would never dream of being a steward?”

“Why not? Because I am unworthy of the situation, or—as I fear my proud little wife thinks—because the situation is not worthy of me? Nay, a man never loses honour by earning his bread in honourable fashion; and Miss Valery herself said that for this office she required both a gentleman and a friend. Will she accept me?”

And he extended, proudly as his father might—yet with a frank independence nobler than the pride of all the Harpers—his honest right hand. Anne Valery took it, the tears rising in her eyes.

“I could never have offered you this, Nathanael; but since you are so steadfast, so wise—— Yes! it is indeed, considering all things, the wisest course you can pursue.

Only, I will agree to nothing unless your wife consents."

"I will not consent," said Agatha, determinedly.

There was an uncomfortable pause.

"I see in your plan no reason—no right," continued she, forgetting in her annoyance even the outward deference with which her sense of conjugal dignity led her invariably to treat Mr. Harper. "Why was I never told this before?"

"Because I never thought of it myself until this morning."

The exceeding gentleness of his tone surprised her, and restrained many more words, not over-sweet, which were issuing from her angry lips.

"The fact is, Agatha—I may speak before Anne Valery, whom we both love——"

"And who loves you both as if you had been her own kindred."

These words, so tremulously said, swept

away a little bitterness that was rising up in Agatha's heart against Miss Valery.

"It is necessary," Mr. Harper went on—"imperatively so, for my comfort—that I should at once do something. And in choosing one's work, it always seemed to me there was great wisdom in the rule—'*Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might.*' Many things I could not do; this I *can*, well and faithfully, as Anne will find. Nor need I feel ashamed of being steward to Miss Valery."

His manly, dignified way of speech struck Agatha. She felt her spirit of opposition quaking on its throne. "But your father—your sisters. What will they all say at Kingcombe Holm?"

"Nothing that I cannot combat. My father will be glad of our settling near him in Dorsetshire."

"In Dorsetshire!" echoed Mrs. Harper dolefully; and thereupon fled her last visions

of a gay London home. Yet she already liked her husband's county and people well enough to bear the sacrifice with tolerable equanimity.

"And whatever he says, whatever any one else says, I have no fear, if my wife will only stand by me, and trust that I do everything for the best."

His wife listened, not without agitation, for she remembered their first dispute, only a few days ago. Here was rising another storm. Yet either she felt weaker to contend, or something in Nathanael's manner lured her to believe him in the right. She listened—only half convinced, yet still she listened.

Anne Valery did the same, though she took no part in the argument. Only continually her eyes wandered to Nathanael, less with smiling heart-warm affection than with the pensive tenderness with which one

watches a dead likeness revived in a living face.

At last, when he had said all he could—everything except stooping to the weakness of entreaty or complaint—Mr. Harper paused. “Now, Agatha, speak.”

She felt that she must yield, yet tried to struggle a little longer. She had been so unused to control.

“You should have consulted with me—have explained more of your reasons, which as yet I do not comprehend. Why should you be so wondrously anxious to begin work? It is unreasonable, unkind.”

“Am I unkind to you, my poor Agatha?” His accent was that of unutterable pain.

“No! no! that you never are! Only—I suppose because I am young and lately married—I do not half understand you. What must I do, Miss Valery?”

Anne looked from one to the other—

Nathanael, who, as was his habit in all moments of great trial, assumed an aspect unnaturally hard—and Agatha, whose young fierce spirit was just bursting out, wrathful, yet half repentant all the while. “What must you do? You must try to learn the lesson that every woman has to learn from and for the man she loves—to have faith in him.”

“We women,” she continued softly, “the very best and wisest of us, cannot enter thoroughly into the nature of the man we love. We can only love him. That is, when we once believe him worthy of affection. Firmly knowing that, we must bear with all the rest; and where we do not quite understand, we must, as I said, *have faith in him*. I have heard of some women whose faith has lasted all their life.”

Anne's serious smile, and the beautiful steadfastness of her eyes, that vaguely turned seaward—though apparently looking at no-



thing—made a deep impression on the young wife.

She answered, thoughtfully, “ I believe in my husband too, otherwise I would not have married him. Therefore, since our two wills seem to clash, and he is the older and the wiser—let him decide as he thinks best—I will try to ‘ have faith in him.’ ”

Nathanael grasped her hand, but spoke not—it seemed impossible to him. Soon after, they all rose and turned homeward, leaving the breezy terrace and the bright sunshiny sea. None turned to look back at either, excepting only—for one lingering, parting glance—Anne Valery.

## CHAPTER III.

THE same afternoon Mr. and Mrs. Harper and Miss Valery drove to Kingcombe, to see if in that quaint little town there was a house suitable for the young couple. They had not said a word to either of the Miss Harpers concerning this sudden arrangement, agreeing that the father of the household ought to be shown the respect of receiving the first information.

"And then," said Nathanael, "I trust mainly to Anne Valery to overcome his scruples. Anne can do anything she likes with my father. Don't you remember," he continued, leaning over to the front seat

where the two ladies were, and looking quite cheerful, as though a great load had been taken off his mind—"don't you remember—I do, though I was such a little boy—how there was one day a grand family tumult because Frederick wanted his commission and my father refused it—how you walked up and down the garden, first with one and then with the other, persuading everybody to be friends, while Uncle Brian and I ——"

"There; that will do," said Miss Valery, faintly. "Never mind old times, but let us look forward to the future. Here we are at Kingcombe. Agatha, how do you like the place?"

And Agatha, on this glowing autumn afternoon, eagerly examined her future home.

It was a rather note-worthy country town ; small, clean, with an air of sober preservation, reminding one of a well-kept, dignified, healthy old age. It wore its antiquity with a sort of pride, as if its quaint streets, inter-

secting one another in cruciform shape, still kept the impress of mediæval feet, baron's or priest's, in the days when Kingcombe had sixteen churches and a castle to boot—as if the Roman walls which enclosed it, lay solemnly conscious that, at night, ghosts of old Latin warriors glided over the smooth turf of those great earthen mounds where the town's-children played. Even the very river, which came up to the town narrow and slow, with perhaps one sailing-barge on it visible far across the flat country, and looking like a boat taking an insane pedestrian excursion over the meadows—even the river seemed to run silently, as if remembering the time when it had floated up Danish ships with their fierce barbarian freight, and landed them just under that red sand-cliff, where the lazy cows now stood and the innocent blackberry-bushes grew.

It was a curious place, Kingcombe, or so Agatha thought.

"How strange it is," Mr. Harper observed. "All these old spots seem to me like places beheld in a dream. Uncle Brian often used to talk about them. I think to this day he remembers everything and everybody about Kingcombe."

"Does he?"

"And that some day or other he will come back again I do most firmly believe. Do not you, Anne?"

"Yes." As she spoke, her hand involuntarily was pressed upon her side. Agatha wondered she responded so coldly and with so melancholy a look, to such a joyous prospect as Uncle Brian's return would surely be to all the family.

But here they were in Kingcombe streets, —very quiet, sleepy streets, which seemed to have taken an undisturbed doze for a few centuries, to atone for the terrible excitements there created successively by Danish, Roman, Saxon, and baronial ruffians. The

poor little town seemed determined to spend its old age in peace and solitude, for you might have planted a French-Presidential cannonade at the market-place, and swept down East-street, West-street, North-street, and South-street, without laying more than a dozen official murders on your soul. There was indeed great reason for Mrs. Harper's innocent inquiry—"Where are all the people gone to?"

"Except on market-days, we rarely see more street passengers than now in Kingcombe," Anne Valery answered, smiling. "You will get accustomed to that and many other things when you are a country lady. Now, shall we drive to the Dugdales, or look first at the two houses I told you of?"

Mr. Harper preferred the latter course, under fear, his wife merrily declared, of being circumvented by Mrs. Dugdale. The brother and sister, she had already discovered, seemed on as pleasant terms as fire and water,

since, as Harrie punningly averred, one invariably "put out" the other. They did not squabble—Nathanael Harper never squabbled—but they always met with a gentle hissing, like water sprinkled on coals. Agatha, who was quite new to these harmless fraternalities, always occurring in large families, was mightily amused thereat.

The first house the little party looked over was, as Emma Thornycroft would have phrased it, "a love of a place !" Dining-room, drawing-rooms, conservatory, gardens—quite a gentleman's mansion. Agatha set her heart upon it incontinently, and it blotted out even her lingering regret over the lost home in the Regent's Park. She ran over the rooms with the glee of a child, and only came back to her husband to urge him to take it, giving her this thing and that thing necessary to its beautification.

He patted her cheek with a pleased yet sad look.

"Dear, I will give you all I can ; be quite sure of that. But——"

"Nay, no buts ; I must have this house. Besides, Miss Valery says it is the only house to let in Kingcombe."

"Except the one I showed you as we passed."

"Oh, that mean little cottage—impossible. We could never think of living there."

"Nevertheless, let us look at it. You know we are but just beginning the world, and 'small beginnings make great endings,' as Uncle Brian would sagely observe. Come along, my little wife."

She tried to slip from his hand and appeal to Miss Valery, but Anne had moved forward, and left them alone. There was no resource ; and even while Agatha's spirit was rather restive under the coercion, she could not but acknowledge the pleasantness with which it was enforced.

"Well, I'll go with you, but I hereby de-



clare rebellion. I will not have that miserable nutshell of a house," said she, laughing.

Yet it was a pretty nutshell—quite after the "love in a cottage" fashion—though adorned and perfected by the late Mr. Wilson, an old bachelor.

"Did he die here?" asked Agatha.

"No ; but in Cornwall," Anne answered. "He had gone over to look at some property I have lately bought there. The people on it, miners thrown out of work, gave him more anxiety than he could bear, for he was not strong. He said their misery broke his heart."

Miss Valery spoke softly, but the words caught Nathanael's ear. He looked greatly shocked—and said, in a low tone, "Anne, don't talk of this. If I live, the wrong shall be atoned for."

Agatha wondered for the moment what wrong there was which made her husband look so pained and humbled. But she

forbore to ask questions, and again turned her attention to the house.

"It must have been a charming nest for an old bachelor, and I would have liked it very much myself had I been an old maid. But it would never do for *us*, you know."

Nathanael smiled, so loth to contradict her, or thwart her pretty ways.

"Don't you see, Miss Valery," Agatha continued, gathering apprehensions from his silence, smiling though it was—"don't you see how different the cases are? This little house might do very well for Mr. Wilson, but then if my husband takes his place as your steward, it is only for amusement. We are rich people, you know."

"My poor child!" began Anne Valery, looking regretfully, nay, reproachfully at Mr. Harper. But he whispered as he passed:

"Not yet, Anne—for my father's sake—

the whole family's—nay, her own. Not just yet!”

Such was his earnestness, such his air of resolute command, that, for the second time, Anne looking in his face and reading the old likeness there—obeyed him.

Agatha, wondering, uncomfortable, recommenced what she jestingly called “her little rebellion.” “I see, Mr. Harper, your heart is inclining to this place, though why or wherefore I cannot tell. But do incline it back again! We must have the other house—that delicious Honeywood.”

“My dear little wife! nobody could live at Honeywood under a thousand a year.”

“Well, and have we not that? I am sure I thought I had more money than ever I could do with. How much have I?”

He hesitated—she fancied it was at the thoughtless “I,” and generously changed the expression.

“How much have *we*?”

“Enough—I will make it enough—to

keep you from wanting anything, and give you all the luxuries to which you were born. But not enough to warrant us in living at Honeywood. I cannot do it—not even for your sake, Agatha.”

“I do not see the matter as you do.”

“You cannot, dear! I know that. But in this one thing—when, on various accounts, I can judge better than she can—will not my wife trust me?”

And Anne Valery's glance seemed to echo,  
“Trust him.”

Agatha, tried to the utmost of her small stock of patience, grew more bitter than she could have believed it possible to be with her husband and Anne Valery.

“You expect too much,” she said, sharply.  
“I cannot trust, even though I may be compelled to obey.”

Mr. Harper turned round anxiously.  
“Agatha, what must—what can I do? No,” he muttered to himself, “I can do nothing.”  
He walked to the window, and stood look-

ing out mutely on the little garden—tiny, but so pretty, with its green verandah, its semi-circle of arbutus-trees serving as a frame to the hilly landscape beyond, its one wavy acacia, woodbine-clasped, at the foot of which a robin-redbreast was hopping and singing over the few fallen leaves.

While they all thus stood, there came a light foot and a flutter of draperies to the door.

“My patience! what are you all doing here? So, Agatha — Anne! How d’ye do, my worthy brother? Why didn’t you all come to our house?”

“We were coming directly,” Agatha said. “But how did you find out we were at Kingcombe?”

“You little London-lady! As if anybody, especially the much-beloved Anne Valery (saving her presence), and the much-wondered-at Mr. and Mrs. Locke Harper, could drive through Kingcombe without

the fact being speedily circulated throughout the whole town? Why, my dear, if you must know, the grocer told Mrs. Edwards' nursemaid, and Mrs. Edwards' nursemaid told it to Mrs. Jones at the Library, and Mrs. Jones told Miss Trenchard, who was coming to call on me; so I asked Duke to give the children their dinner, and off I started, tracking you as cleverly as one of Nathanael's Red Indians. And here I am."

She stopped, breathless, her flounces, veil, and shawl flying abroad in all directions. But she looked so hearty, natural, and good-humoured, that her entrance was quite a relief to Agatha—more especially as, for a great wonder, she asked no questions.

"So, I hear you have been showing Honeywood to Mrs. Harper. Pretty place, isn't it? A pity it's not on your property, Anne, or you would not let it go to ruin unlet. And here is poor Mr. Wilson's old

house, with all the furniture just as it was. How melancholy !”

She said “How melancholy !” just in the tone that she would have said “How entertaining !” From circumstances, or from natural peculiarity—that light easy temper which dances like a feather over the troubled waters of life—she had evidently never learnt the meaning of the word sorrow.

“But now,” Harriet continued, “what I come for, is to carry you all off to lunch—the children’s dinner. My dear, you must see my boys, your nephews.”

Agatha stood aghast at the idea of having nephews !

“And such boys !” Miss Valery added, interposing. “ ‘The Missus’ has good right to be proud of them. If there is one thing in which Harrie succeeds better than another, it is in the management of her children.”

“Bah ! they manage themselves ; I just leave them to nature,” cried Mrs. Dugdale ;

but her eye—the mother's eye—twinkled with pleasure all the time, which greatly improved its expression, Agatha thought. She walked off gaily with her sister-in-law, Nathanael following. Anne stayed behind, conversing with the old woman who showed the house. She and Mr. Harper had pointedly avoided any private speech with one another.

“I declare there is Duke!” cried Mrs. Dugdale, suddenly. “Just look at him, meandering up and down the town.” (Agatha laughed at the word; “meandering” seemed so perfectly expressive of Duke Dugdale.) “But my husband always turns up everywhere, except where he's wanted. Does yours? I beg your pardon—since you are watching him as if you thought he were running away. Nonsense, Agatha—(I always call every body by their Christian names)—Nonsense! He's only shaking hands with his brother-in-law, both looking as pleased as ever they can look.”



The next moment Harrie and Agatha came up with the two gentlemen at the door of Mr. Dugdale's house. They were talking politically and earnestly, as men will do—Nathanael having apparently forgotten the bitter cloud of a few minutes since, which yet lay heavy on his wife's heart. At least it seemed so, and his indifference made her angry.

Neither spoke to their women-kind—being busy laying their heads together over a newspaper—until Harrie very unceremoniously began to pull at her husband's coat, which he bore for a time in perfect obliviousness. At last he turned and patted her with his great hand, just as some sage, mild Newfoundland dog would coax into peace the attacks of a wild young kitten.

"Nay now, Missus—don't'ee love; I'm busy.—And you see, Nathanael, as your brother is sure not to canvass or try for the town, and as Mr. Trenchard is such a fine fellow, your father's friend too, don't you

think we could coax him round ? By conviction, of course : Trenchard wouldn't take any man's votes except upon conviction."

"Wouldn't he?" said Nathanael, smiling at the simple-minded politician, who believed that everybody's politics were as honest as his own. At which unpropitious moment a group of not exactly sober men, with "Vote for Trenchard" stuck round their broken hats, came round the corner shouting :

"Hurrah for Free-trade ! Duke Dugdale for ever ! Bravo !—and give us a shilling ! Amen !"

"You see now what comes of your politics," cried his wife, trying to pull him into the hall. But the good man still stood, bare-headed, a perplexed expression troubling his face.

"It's very odd, now ; I made Trenchard promise not to give them a penny for drink. Poor fellows ! if they only knew better ! But I'll tell'ee what it is, Nathanael," and he used the slight Dorset accent, which always

broadened when he was very earnest, "those lads drink because they are starving—drink drowns care. If they had Free-trade they wouldn't be starving: if they were not starving they wouldn't drink. Therefore, hurrah for Free-trade, and, my poor fellows, here's your shilling! Only don't'ee let it go for more drink; and, *hark'ee*, it's no bribery-money o' Mr. Trenchard's, it's *mine*."

"Thank'ee, zir, thank'ee; hurrah for Duke Dugdale and Free-trade!" shouted the men as they went off.

Mr. Dugdale stood looking after them with that mild, benevolent smile which made his ugly face quite beautiful—at least Agatha thought so;—which was very generous in her, seeing he had not taken the least notice of her all this while; when he did, it was in the most passing way.

"Eh—what, Missus? did you say Mrs. Harper was here?" He shook hands with her, looking in another direction;—then again turned to Nathanael.

"Utterly useless!" cried Harrie, laughing. "He's more misty than usual to-day. Let us leave the men alone, stupid bears as they are! and come up-stairs to the children."

All this time no one asked or looked for Miss Valery, who had lingered behind, bidding them go forward. It seemed the habit of the family that she should be left to go about in her own fashion, interfered with by nobody, and attended by nobody, save when she came among them to do them good. It was not wonderful; since, having passed that time of youth when a pleasant woman is everybody's petted darling, she had lived to feel herself alone in the world—wife, sister, and child to no one. It always takes a certain amount of moral courage to meet that destiny.

Aided by the beneficial influence of dinner, which in the Dugdales' house seemed to have the mysterious property of extending over an indefinite time, Agatha had succeeded in making friends with her "ne-

phews," to say nothing of a lovely little niece, who would persist in putting chubby arms round "Pa's" neck, and dividing his attention sorely between Free-trade and rice-pudding. Mr. Harper had taken another child on his knee, and was cutting oranges and doing "uncle Nathanael" to perfection. His wife stole beside him with affection. Why would he not be always as now? Why was he so good, so gentle to others, yet so hard to be understood by her? Was it her own fault? She almost believed so.

On this group, all happy, all united together by those lovely links in the chain of happiness—little children—Anne Valery entered. She passed round the table, having a word, or smile, or kiss for all. Then she went to an arm-chair, looking tired, though joining all the while in the conversation, particularly with Mr. Dugdale, who seemed to have a great regard for her.

"Ah, Miss Valery, I wish you were a man, and could vote for us!" said he, peering

from underneath the baby-hands which made a pointed Norman arch over "Pa's" eyes. "You'd be sure to vote on the right side. Didn't we make a convert of you, Brian and I, years before people talked of Free-trade; long before he went out, and I got married to mamma there. Eh, Brian, my lad"—and he patted his youngest boy, throned on Mr. Harper's knee—"if you only grow up such a wise man as your grand-uncle!"

Agatha was amused to see how the idea and recollection of Uncle Brian had permeated through every branch of the Harper family. Almost every family has some such personage, mythical, sublime, exciting the wonder and hero-worship of all the young people. Little Brian opened wide his large grey eyes at the mention of his honoured namesake.

But while he gazed, his papa's pudding-laden spoon stopped half-way on its journey to the baby-mouth that was waiting for it—Duke Dugdale was in a reverie. He did not even hear the little clamourer on his knee.

"Really, now, that's very odd, very odd indeed." And he felt anxiously in his pocket. "No, I had another coat on that day—mamma, where's my grey over-coat?"

"Duke—what on earth are you talking about? Now, Agatha, confess— isn't my husband the very vaguest, mistiest man you ever knew? Oh, you dear old visionary, what do you want with grey over-coats at dinner-time?"

He smiled patiently—perhaps he did not even hear—put down his little girl, and walked out of the room, his wife anxiously jumping up and following with some pathetic exclamation about "Duke's being so cross!" Which seemed to Agatha an amusing exaggeration; there was such a wise elephantine gentleness about Mr. Dugdale.

In a minute or two this most opposite couple—opposite, but fitting like a dovetailed joint—came in merrily together, Harrie holding a letter.

"Would you believe, he got it last week,

has been carrying it about ever since, and never thought of it! There, Nathanael, it's yours! Devour it!"

"From Uncle Brian!" cried the young man. At which name there ran a great sensation throughout the family, in all but Miss Valery, who still kept her chair.

"News! news!" cried Harrie, Agatha and the boys gathering round. Mr. Dugdale walked up and down the room—his hands behind him—smiling in benevolent content at everybody and at nobody. Brian and his tiny sister consoled themselves for the little attention they got by slyly climbing on the table and embedding their fingers in the rice-pudding.

Nathanael read the letter aloud, as seemed to be the family custom with Uncle Brian's correspondence.

"MY DEAR BOY,

"I find the Western solitudes are no nearer heaven than civilisation. My two



red friends having escaped and got back, which they did on purpose to tomahawk me—I gave the tribe the slip, and am here in New York. There I accidentally received your letter.

“ You are a foolish boy. When I was young, I think I would rather have died than have married a rich woman, even if she loved me, which no woman ever did. Nevertheless, I hope you will fare better than you deserve.

“ Shall you ever come back to America? Not on my account, I pray, though I miss you, and am getting old and lonely. Perhaps it is as well that you left me, and have married and settled. That seems to me now the happier, worthier life for a man to lead. I should like to come and see you, if I could come not quite the beggar I am now. Therefore, I often think I shall go to California.”

There was a light movement among the listening group, as Miss Valery was found quietly to have joined them, and to be lean-

ing over Nathanael's shoulder. He pointed his finger to the letter that she might read it with him. She moved her head in thanks, but uttered no sound. He continued :

“ If in this or any other form of the mad gold-fever I can heap up a little of that cursed—I mean blessed dust, you may possibly see me in England. Till then—or till death—which seems equally likely, I remain,

“ Your affectionate Uncle,

“ BRIAN LOCKE HARPER.

“ P.S.—I send this through Marmaduke Dugdale's late agent in New York. Tell my old friend Duke that I congratulate him on having given up merchandising, so that my brother at Kingcombe Holm can no longer reproach him with being the only one of the Harper connexion who *earns* a livelihood.”

This letter, which was trying to read, being sharp and stinging on many points to more than one person present, Nathanael went steadily through, though several times

his colour changed. No one made any comment except Agatha, who observed "that Uncle Brian must be rather bitter and sarcastic at heart."

"No — not bitter," Anne Valery said, — "only sorrowful. It is often so, when after a hard life men feel themselves growing old. What shall you do, Nathanael?"

"About what? His going to California? Nay, I cannot prevent that. What use in my writing when he gives me such lectures about my marriage?"

"He would not if he knew her. Besides, in this doctrine he errs a little. It is of small moment on which side lies the wealth; —love makes all things even."

Mr. Harper turned away with one of those uneasy looks which Agatha had already begun to notice and speculate over. She made up her mind that at the first possible opportunity she would muster up courage, and claim her right as a wife to know her husband's whole heart.

The epistle produced a considerable change on the family group. The boys were clamorous to know all about California, and whether Uncle Brian would not come home in a gold ship with silver sails; on which subject Nathanael was too full of his own thoughts to give much satisfactory information. Mr. Dugdale had walked out of the window into the garden behind, where Miss Valery followed him, and they two were seen strolling up and down in close conversation. As they passed the window, Agatha noticed that Anne Valery's cheeks were slightly flushed, and that Mr. Dugdale's "mistiness" of manner had assumed an unusual clearness. He was shaking his companion warmly by the hand.

"Anne, what a wise woman you are! Such a plan would have been years in coming into *my* head. And it's just the very thing. It will give him occupation and independence without hurting his pride. Moreover—" and

a sudden thought dilated his whole countenance with pleasure—"I shouldn't wonder if it brought him home."

"Hush!"

"Oh yes, I'll remember, we must be very particular. By-the-by, Anne"—here a bright idea seemed to strike the worthy man—"what a help he would be to us against the Protectionists? Wouldn't *he* see the blessing of Free-trade?"

Anne smiled, with her finger on her lip to stop the conversation; and they stepped in at the window;—Mrs. Harper taking care to glide away lest they should suspect what she had so unintentionally heard. It was doubtless one of Miss Valery's numerous anonymous charities, which fell as abundant and unnoticed as rain.

"Now"—and Anne startled her god-child Brian by turning up his little rosy chin and kissing him—"now, who will come back with us to that grand family-dinner

which the Squire has set his heart upon, and Mary is so busy about to-day at Kingcombe Holm?"

All soon started ; Agatha being kidnapped, not much against her will, by her gay sister-in-law, and driven across the moors at such a helter-skelter pace that Nathanael, who had insisted upon following them on horseback, received his wife at the door with an evident thanksgiving that she had reached home alive.

Miss Valery's little equipage came leisurely on behind. Nobody asked what she and Duke Dugdale had conversed about ; but Harrie shrewdly suspected he had been talking poor dear Anne to death about the votes of her Kingcombe tenantry, and the probable chances of Mr. Trenchard and Free-trade.

## CHAPTER IV.

To see the elder Mr. Harper sitting at the head of his own dinner-table was a real pleasure. He never looked so well at any other time. His grandiose air was then so mixed with genuine kindness that it only enriched his courtesies, like the "body" in mellow old wine. He leaned graciously back in the arm-chair peculiarly his own, surveying the long table shone over by soft wax-lights, and circled by smiling faces, most of them women, as the old gentleman liked best. Even the plain Mary, taking the foot of the table, looked well and mistress-like in her black velvet dress; Eulalie and Mrs. Dugdale kept up the good appearance of the

family; while Miss Valery and the young Mrs. Harper took either side of the host, and were duly honoured by him.

Agatha wore her wedding-dress, of white silk, rich and plain. She looked very pretty, her girlish *abandon* of manner softened by a certain wifely dignity, which grew upon her day by day. She filled her position well, though often with secret trembling, and shy glances over to her husband to see if he were satisfied with her—a fact which no one but herself could doubt.

“Now, my children,” said the Squire, when the servants had withdrawn, and dessert and wines foretold the chatty hour after dinner of which he was so fond—“now my children—I may call you all so?” and he smiled at Anne Valery—“let me tell you how glad I am to see you, and especially the youngest of you”—here he softly patted Agatha’s hand, on the table. “And since we always drink healths here—a good old fashion that



I should be loth to renounce—let me give you the first toast—Mr. and Mrs. Nathanael Locke Harper!”

“Hear, hear!” said Mr. Dugdale vaguely from the bottom of the table, at which indecorum—probably occasioned by a county meeting that was running in his head—his father-in-law looked extremely severe. But the severity was soon drowned in the nods and smiles that circled round. After which Nathanael said, briefly but with feeling:

“Father, my brother and sisters, and Anne—my wife and I thank you all.”

“What do you think of this our old-fashioned custom?” said the Squire, turning to his daughter-in-law. “A remnant of my young days, when every lady used to be called upon to give the health of a gentleman, and every gentleman of a lady. It was always so at your grandfather’s table, Anne, where many a time when you were a babe in long-clothes I had the pleasure of giving yours.”

"Thank you," said Anne, smiling. She was evidently a great favourite with the old gentleman.

"You should know, my dear daughter-in-law, that my acquaintance with this lady dates almost from her birth. And for nineteen years I held over her the right which I understand my eldest son"—he paused a moment—"which Major Harper had the honour to hold over you. Her grandfather left me his executor and sole guardian of his infant heiress. I was a young man then, but I tried to deserve his trust. Did I, Anne?"

Again she smiled—most affectionately.

"And I had the pleasure of seeing my ward at twenty-one the richest heiress and the truest gentlewoman in the west of England. She did me infinite credit, and I had fulfilled to my friend one of the most sacred trusts a man can receive. Your excellent grandfather, Anne—let us drink his memory."

Reverently and in silence the old Squire

raised the glass to his lips—a glass filled with only water—he never took wine.

“You see, my dear young lady, how this old custom brings back all lost or absent friends. We never forget them, and like to talk of them and of old times. Thus, always at this hour, we gather round us innumerable pleasant recollections, and remember all who are dear to us or to our guests at Kingcombe Holm.—Now, Mrs. Harper, we wait your toast.”

Agatha coloured, felt nervous and ashamed, glanced at her husband, but met nothing except an encouraging smile. She thought—remembering her own few ties—that she would gratify Nathanael by naming some one nearest to him. So she looked up timidly, and gave “Uncle Brian.”

Every one applauded—the Squire graciously acknowledging the compliment to his brother.

“The youngest and only surviving brother of many, and as such, much regarded by me,”

he explained to his daughter-in-law. "In spite of the great difference in our ages, and some trifling opposition in our characters, I cherish the highest esteem for my brother Brian." And hereupon he asked for the letter received that day; which was duly read aloud by his son—saving the wise omission of the postscript.

"Go to California!" said old Mr. Harper, knitting his brows. "I do not like that—it is unbecoming a gentleman. Though he was wild and daring enough, Brian never yet forgot he was a gentleman. Was it not so, Anne?"

Anne assented, mutely.

"He was a fine generous fellow, too. Do you remember how a week before he left us so suddenly, he rode fifty miles across the country to get some ice for you in your fever? You were very ill then, my poor girl." It was touching to hear him call Miss Valery a "girl"—she whom the young Agatha regarded as quite an elderly woman.

“And though he did leave us so abruptly—wherefore, remains to this day a mystery, unless it was a young man’s whim and love of change—still I have the greatest dependence on Brian Harper,” continued the Squire, who seemed as a parental right to monopolise all the talk at table.

“Brian Harper!” exclaimed Mr. Dugdale, waking from a trance. “Yes—Brian would surely be able to furnish those statistics on Canadian wheat. His judgment was always as sound as his politics.”

“What was your remark, Marmaduke?” said the old Squire, testily.

“Oh, nothing—nothing, father!” Harrie quickly answered, with a half merry, half warning frown at her lord. Mr. Dugdale folded himself up again into silence, with the quiet consciousness of one who has a pearl in his keeping—the undoubted value of which there is no need either to put forward or to defend.

Miss Valery here came to the rescue, and turned the conversation into a merry channel.

Agatha was surprised to find what a wondrous power of unfeigned home-cheerfulness there was in this woman, who had lived to be called even by those that loved her, "an old maid." And when at last the Squire gracefully allowed the departure of his women-kind, who floated away like a flock of released birds, they all clustered around Anne, as though she were in the constant habit of knowing everybody's business, and of thinking and judging for everybody.

Agatha sat a little way off, watching her, and wondering what could be the strange influence which always made her take delight in watching Anne Valery.

There is something very peculiar in this admiration which one woman occasionally conceives for another, generally much older than herself. It is not exactly friendship, but partakes more of the character of love—in its idealisation, its shyness, its enthusiastic reverence, its hopeless doubt of requital, and, above all, its jealousies. For

this reason, it generally comes previous to, or for want of, the real love, the drawing of the feminine soul towards its masculine half, which makes—according to the Platonic doctrine—a perfect being. Of course, this theory would be almost universally considered “sentimentalism”—Agatha’s little infatuation being included therein; but the frequency of such infatuations existing in the world around us, argues some truth at their origin.

To the young girl—still so girlish, though she was married—there was an inexplicable attraction in all Anne Valery said or did. The very sweep of her dress across the floor—her slow soft motions, which might have been haughty when she was young, but now were only gracious and self-possessed; the way she had of folding her hands on one another, and looking straight forward with a kind observant smile, free alike from sentiment, crossness, or melancholy; her tone and manner, neither showy nor sharp; her

habit of saying the wisest things in the most simple way, so that nobody recognised them as wisdom till afterwards—all filled Agatha with a sense of satisfied admiration. She wished either that she had been a man, to have adored and married Anne years ago—or that her own marriage had been delayed for a little, until she had grown wiser and more fit for life's destiny by learning from and loving such a woman as Miss Valery.

Moreover, with the dawning jealousy that all strong likings bring, she wished to appropriate her—and was quite annoyed that Anne sat so long discussing winter mantles with Eulalie and Mary, afterwards diverging to a Christmas clothing fund to be started at Kingcombe under Mrs. Dugdale's eye; finally listening to a whispered communication on the part of the Beauty—which had reference to a certain "Edward"—about whose position in the family there could be no mistake. At last, to Agatha's great satisfaction, Miss



Valery rose, and proposed that they two—Mrs. Harper and herself—should go and visit Elizabeth.

Passing through the galleries, Anne seemed tired, and walked slowly, stopping one minute at a window to show her companion the moonlight over the hills.

“Is it not a beautiful world, Agatha! If we could but look at it always as we do when we are young!” The half sigh, the momentary shadow sweeping over her quiet face like a cloud over the moon—surprised and touched Agatha.

“Do you know, I have stood and looked out of this same window ever since I was the height of its first pane. No wonder I have a weakness for stopping here and looking out for a minute at my dear old moon. But let us pass on.”

She took up her candle again, and led Agatha by the hand, like a pet-child, to Elizabeth's door.

Miss Harper was lying as usual, but had a writing-case before her, and it was astonishing what neat caligraphy those weak childish-looking fingers could execute. It resembled the writer's own mind—clear, delicate, well-arranged, exact.

“We are not come to stay very long; but do we interrupt you, Elizabeth?”

“Never, Anne dear! I was only writing to Frederick. He is gone abroad, you are aware?”

“Yes.”

“I want to know why he went? Has Nathanael told either of you?” said Elizabeth, fixing her quick eyes on both her visitors.

Both answered in the negative—Miss Valery saying, with attempted gaiety, “you know, one might as well question a stone-wall as Nathanael. He can be both deaf and dumb.”

“Not to me. Everybody tells me everything, or I find it out. I found out that this little lady had a chance of being my sister-in-

law before ever she herself was certain of the fact. Ah, Agatha, you should have seen Nathanael when he came down to us that week."

"What did he do?" the young wife asked, not without some painful curiosity—for sometimes, in the moments when she could not "make out" her husband's rather peculiar character, a wicked demon had whispered that perhaps Mr. Harper had never truly loved her, or that his devotion was too sudden to be a lasting reality.

"What did he do?—Oh, nothing. He was very quiet, very self-possessed. You could hardly tell he was in love at all. Nobody ever guessed it but me—not even Anne. But in love or not, I saw that he was determined to have you; and when Nathanael determines on a thing— Oh, I knew you would be married to him! You could not help it!"

"Nor did she wish—nor need she," said Anne, gently, as she saw Agatha's con-

fusion. "But we shall soon cease teasing our young couple. I hear that at Christmas we shall have another marriage in the family. Edward Thorpe has got the living — the richest one."

"So, of course, Eulalie will marry him." The deduction reached Agatha as rather sarcastic, though perhaps more through the interpretation of her own feeling than that of the speaker. She asked, with one of her usual plain speeches:

"Does Eulalie love Mr. Thorpe very much?"

The remark was addressed to both; but after a pause Elizabeth said, "Answer that question, Anne."

"What sort of an answer do you want, my dear?"

"One perfectly plain. I like simplicity. Is Eulalie much attached to the man she is to marry?"

"Women marry with many forms of love; Eulalie's will do exceedingly well for Mr.

Thorpe. He is a very worthy young clergyman, who takes a wife as a matter of necessity. As for love—have you noticed, Agatha, how many women one sees, wives and mothers, who live creditably through a long life, and go down to their graves without ever having known the real meaning of the word ?”

Anne was talking more than usual to-night, and Agatha liked to listen. The subject came home to her. “Will Eulalie be one of these ?”

“I think so. She may make a very good, attentive wife, but she will never know what is real love.”

“Tell me, what is that sort of love—the right love—which one ought to bring to one’s husband ?”

Miss Valery looked surprised at the young girl’s eager manner. “Are you seriously asking that question? and of me, who never had a husband ?”

“Oh, one likes to hear various opinions. What do you call ‘loving’ ?”

"Almost every human being loves in a different way."

"Well, then, your way I mean." But noticing the momentary reticence which Anne's manner showed, and remembering that all old maids were young once, she added, "I mean, the kind of love you have most sympathy with in other people."

"I have sympathy in ll. My neighbours will tell you hereabouts that Anne Valery is the universal confidante, and the greatest marriage-maker (not match-maker) in all Dorset. I don't repudiate the character. It is pleasant to see young people loving one another."

"Still, you have not told me what *you* call loving."

"Do you really wish to hear?" said Anne seriously. Then speaking in a low voice, she added: "I would have every woman marry, not merely liking a man well enough to accept him as a husband, but loving him so wholly, that, wedded or not, she

feels she is at heart his wife and none other's, to the end of her life. So faithful, that she can see all his little faults (though she takes care no one else shall see them), yet would as soon think of loving him the less for these, as of ceasing to look up to heaven because there are a few clouds in the sky. So true, and so fond, that she needs neither to vex him with her constancy, nor burden him with her love, since both are self-existent, and entirely independent of anything he gives or takes away. Thus she will marry neither from liking, esteem, or gratitude for his love, but from the fulness of her own. If they never marry, as sometimes happens"—and Anne's voice slightly faltered—"God will cause them to meet in the next existence. They cannot be parted—they belong to one other."

All were silent—these three women—one to whom love must have been only a name; the other who spoke of it quietly, seriously, as we talk of things belonging to the

world to come ; and the young wife, who sat thoughtful, wondering, doubting, afraid to believe in a truth which brought with it her own condemnation.

“ You talk, Miss Valery, as people do in books. Some would call it romance.”

“ Would they ? And do you ? ”

“ Not quite. I used to think the same sometimes ; but perfect love, like perfect beauty, is a thing one never meets with in real life.”

“ Yet one does not the less believe in it, and desire to find approximations thereto. No, my child, I do not talk romance. I am too old for that, and have seen too much of the world. Nevertheless, despite all I have seen—the false, foolish, weak attachments—the unholy marriages—the after-life of marriage made unholy still by struggling against what was inevitable—still I believe in the one true love which binds a woman’s heart faithfully to one man in this life and, God grant it ! in the next. But you have no



need to hear all this—little wife? You do not wish to be taught how to love Nathanael?”

Agatha tried to smile—to conceal the pain rising in her heart.

“Come then, I will teach you how to love him—in better words than mine, and from a woman who, though writing out of the deep truth of her poet-heart, would scorn to write mere ‘romance.’”

• “Any woman would,” answered Agatha, running her eyes over a book, which Miss Valery had lifted from the silk coverlid, and which “poor Elizabeth” looked after fondly, as sick people do after the face of a friend.

“Listen, with your heart open. It is sure to find entrance there,” said Anne merrily, until, turning over the pages, she grew serious. She was not quite too old to be insensible to the glamour of poetry. Her voice was hardly like itself—at least, not like what Agatha had ever heard it—when she began to read:

"How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.  
I love thee to the depth, and breath, and height  
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight  
For the ends of Being and Ideal Grace.  
I love thee to the level of every day's  
Most quiet need; by sun and candle-light.  
I love thee freely, as men strive for right:  
I love thee purely, as they turn from praise:  
I love thee with the passion put to use  
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith:  
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose  
With my lost saints: I love thee with the breath,  
Smiles, tears, of all my life! and, if God choose,  
I shall but love thee better after death."

There was a pause of full-hearted silence, and then Agatha heard a sigh behind her.

Her husband had come to the door, and, hearing reading had stolen in, no one noticing him but his sister. Agatha saw nothing; her eyelids were closely, fiercely shut, over the tears that rose at this vision of a lost or impossible paradise.

"Agatha!" She looked up, and saw him stand, wearing his palest, coldest aspect — that which always seemed to freeze up every young feeling within her. The pang it gave found vent in but one expres-

sion—scarcely meant to pass her lips—and inaudible to all save him:

“Oh, why—why did I marry!”

The moment after, she felt how wrong it was, and would have atoned; but Mr. Harper had moved quickly from her side. Elizabeth called him; he seemed not to hear; Anne, closing her book, addressed him:

“Are you come to talk with us, or to fetch your wife away?”

“Neither, for both might be unwelcome,” he said, bitterly. But recovering himself—

“Nay, Anne, I came for you. My father wishes to see you. He will hear nothing I can urge. You must come down and talk with him, or I do not know what will be done.”

Agatha had until now forgotten that her husband had intended after dinner to tell his father his plans concerning the stewardship. It had been apparently a harder task than he thought, to strive with the old

Squire's prejudices. Seeing his extreme perturbation, Agatha repented herself deeply of any unkindness towards him.

She went to his side. "What is the matter? Tell me! Let me help you."

"You help me!" he echoed, despondently; then added, with an accent studiously kind, "Thank you, Agatha. You do all you can."

He let her take his arm and stand talking with himself and Miss Valery.

"I feared it would be so," the latter said. "Your father has a strong will; still he can be persuaded. We must try."

"But only persuasion—no reasons. Understand me, Anne—no reasons!"

Miss Valery looked at the young man very earnestly. "Nathanael, if I did not know you well, and know too whose guidance formed your character, it would be hard to trust——"

"Anne!" Again the peculiar manner which sometimes appeared in him, making

him seem much older than his years, had its strange influence with Miss Valery, guiding her by an under-current deeper even than her judgment.

"Ay," she said in a whisper, "I will trust you. Let us go down." And she turned with him to say good-by to Miss Harper.

The excitement of talking had been too much for "poor Elizabeth." One of her "dark hours" was upon her. The eyes were closed, and the face sharpened under keen physical pain. Agatha could hardly bear to see her; but Nathanael bent over his sister with that soothing kindness which in a man is so beautiful.

"Shall we stay with you? at least, shall I?"

Elizabeth motioned a decided negative.

"I know," Miss Valery said, apart, "she had rather be alone. No one can do her good, and it is too much for this child, who is not used to it as we are."

Calling Elizabeth's maid from the inner

room, Anne hurried Agatha away. She, clinging to her husband's arm, heard him say, half to himself:

“And yet we think life hard, and murmur at that we have, and grieve for that we have not! We are very wicked, all of us. Poor Elizabeth!”

The three went very silently down-stairs.

At the dining-room door Mrs. Harper let go her husband's arm.

“Why are you leaving me, Agatha?”

“Because I thought—I imagined, perhaps you wished——”

“I wish to have you with me always. Anne knows,” and he looked pointedly at Miss Valery, “that I shall never respond to, and most certainly never volunteer, any confidence to either father or friend that I do not share with my wife. She has the first claim, and what is not hers no other person shall obtain.”

Anne looked puzzled. At last she said,

in an under tone, "I think I understand, and you are quite right. I shall remember."

The old Squire was sitting in his arm-chair, the dessert and wine still before him. The cheerfulness of the dinner-circle over, he looked very aged now—aged and lonely too, being the only occupant of that large room. He raised his head when Miss Valery entered, but seemed annoyed at the entrance of his daughter-in-law.

"Mrs. Harper! I did not mean to encroach on *your* leisure."

"No, father; it was I who wished her to come. Forgive me, but I could not bring Miss Valery into our family councils and exclude my own wife. She is not a stranger now."

Saying this, Nathanael placed Agatha in a chair, and stood beside her, taking her cold hand, for with all her power she could not keep herself from trembling. She had never known anything of those for-

midable affairs which are called "family quarrels."

"Now, father," he continued, in a straightforward but respectful manner, "Anne will answer any question to prove what I have already told you—that it is at my own request she takes me for her steward."

"Her friend and adviser," Anne interposed.

"I never doubted, Nathanael, that it was at your own request. Otherwise, it were impossible that Miss Valery would so far have insulted my family."

At these words Anne coloured, and moved a step or two with something of the pride of her young days. "I did not think, Mr. Harper, that it would have been either an insult to offer, or a disgrace to accept, the position which your son desires to hold. Far be it from me in any way to wrong any member of your family, especially the son whom your wife left in my arms—and Brian's—when she died."



Agatha had never before heard Miss Valery say "Brian." She was evidently speaking as people do when much moved, using a form of phrase and alluding to things not commonly referred to.

The old Squire sat silent a minute, and then stretched out his hand. "I know your goodness, Anne! But I cannot renounce all my rights. Even a younger son must not throw discredit on his family. Except in one brief instance, for centuries there has never been a Harper who worked for his living."

"Then, father, let me be the first to commence that act of unconceivable boldness and energy," said Nathanael, with a good-humoured, persuasive smile. "Let me, being likewise a younger son, take a leaf out of Uncle Brian's book, and try to labour, as he once did, in my own county, with the honour of my own race about me."

"And what did he effect? Was he not looked down upon, humiliated, cheated? I

never ride past his old deserted clay-pits without being thankful that he went to Canada, rather than have disgraced us by what his folly must have come to at last. He would have lost the little he had—have been bankrupt, perhaps dishonoured.”

“Mr. Harper!”—Anne rose from her chair, —“I think you speak rather hardly of your brother. It never could be said, or will be said, that Brian Harper was *dishonoured*.”

At these words, spoken with unusual warmth, Nathanael gratefully clasped her hand. The Squire observed, with added dignity, that no one could be more sensible than himself of his brother's merit, and that he thanked Miss Valery for extending her kind interest to every branch of the Harper family.

“And now,” he continued, “we will cease this conversation. My son knows my sentiments, and will doubtless act upon them. I never maintain arguments with my children.”

And the sentence implied that what "I never do," was consequently a thing unnecessary and impossible to be done. The old gentleman leant on each arm of his chair, and feebly tried to rise.

"Father," cried Nathanael, detaining him, "I would do much rather than try you thus; but it cannot be helped. I must work."

"I do not see the necessity."

"But if there be a necessity; if my own feelings, my conscience—other reasons, which here I cannot urge——" and involuntarily his eye glanced towards his wife.

An instinct of delicacy brightened the old man's perceptions. He bowed to Agatha.

"We need not apologise for these discussions before a lady who has done my son the honour of uniting her fortune to his ancient family." (And he evidently thought the honour bestowed was quite as much on the Harper side.) "She, I am sure, will agree with me that this proceeding is not necessary."

Agatha hesitated. Much as she longed to do it, a sense of right prevented her from openly siding against her husband. She kept silence; Nathanael answered with the tone of one who sets a strong guard upon his lips, almost stronger than he can bear :

“ I have already told my wife all the reasons I have just given you, that since I am resolved to be independent, there is no way but this. I have been brought up abroad, and have learnt no profession; my health is not robust enough for a town life, or for hard study. Many, almost all the usual modes in which a man, born a gentleman, can earn his living, are thus shut out from me. What Anne Valery offers me I *can* do, and should be content in doing. Father, do not stand in the way of my winning for myself a little comfort—a little peace.”

Through his entreaty, earnest and manly as it was, there ran a sort of melancholy which surprised and grieved Agatha. Could this be the lover on whom, in giving him

herself, she believed she had bestowed entire felicity? Had he too, like her own heart, found a something wanting in marriage, a something, to fill up which he must needs resort to an active career of worldly toil? Would she never be able to make either him or herself truly happy? and if so, what was the cause?

The Squire regarded his son, who stood before him in an attitude so respectful yet so firm. Something seemed to strike him in the pale, delicate, womanish features; perhaps he saw therein the wife who had died when Nathanael was born, and whose death, people said, had chilled the father's heart strangely against the poor babe.

"My son," he said, "you have been away from me nearly all your life—and where I have given little, I can require little. But I am an old man. Do not let me feel that you too are setting yourself against my grey hairs."

"God knows, father, I would not for

worlds! But what can I do? Anne, what can I do?"

Anne rose, and leant over Mr. Harper's chair, like a privileged eldest daughter who secretly strengthened with her judgment the wisdom that was growing feeble through old age; doing it reverently, as we all would wish our children to do when our own light grows dim. For, alas! the wisest and firmest of us may come one day to mutter in the ears of a younger generation the senile cry, "I am old and foolish—old and foolish."

"Dear friend—if Nathanael follows out this plan, it will be for the comfort and not the disquiet of your grey hairs. Think, how pleasant always to have a son at hand, and a young, pretty Mrs. Harper to brighten Kingcombe Holm."

This was a wise thrust—the old gentleman looked in his daughter-in-law's fair face, and bowed complacently.

"Then, too, your son will live in the coun-

try; lead the life that he loves—and that you love—the very life which all these years you have been vainly planning for his brother.”

The Squire turned sharply round—“On that subject, if you please, we will be silent. Anne, Anne,” he added, “do you want again to turn my plans aside? Would you take from me my other son also?”

She drew back, much wounded.

“No, no, my dear, I did not mean that. It was not your fault—you two were not suited for each other. Nevertheless, in spite of your wilfulness, in nothing but the name did I lose a daughter. Forgive me, Anne?”

“My dear old friend,” she whispered, and stole her fingers into the withered palm of the Squire. He kissed them with the grace of an old courtier: the tenderness of a father. She, though moved at his kindness, betrayed no stronger emotion; and Agatha, who had watched intently this little episode, confirmatory of an old suspicion of her own, was considerably puzzled thereby.

If Anne Valery's life contained any sad secret, it was evidently not this. She had not remained an old maid for love of Major Harper.

"Nathanael," said the old man, returning with dignity to the former conversation, "I would not be harsh or unjust. There is but one way to reconcile our opposing wills, since you are determined on this scheme of independence. You have told me your plan—will you accept mine?"

"Let me hear it, father," answered Nathanael, respectfully.

"You have hitherto had nothing from me—your Uncle Brian insisted on that—nor will you ever have much; I must keep my property intact for the next heir of Kingcombe Holm. Nothing shall alienate the rights of my eldest son, with whom rests the honour of our family and name."

Agatha, noticing the determined pride with which her father-in-law said this, wondered that her husband listened with a



lowered aspect and made no response. She thought it unbrotherly, unkind.

“But,” continued Mr. Harper, “though the chief of all I possess must remain secure for Frederick, I have a little besides, saved for my daughters’ portions. If, with their consent, I lend you this, and you will embark in some profession——”

“No, father, no! I will never take one farthing from you or my sisters! I will not again be burdened with other people’s property! Oh for the days when I earned my own solitary bread from hand to mouth, and was free and at rest!”

He spoke excitedly, and was only conscious of the extent of what he had said by feeling his wife’s hand drop slowly from his own.

“Nay, Agatha, I did not mean——” and he tried to draw it back again. “Forgive me.”

“Perhaps we have both need to forgive one another.”

No one heard this mournful whisper be-

tween the young husband and wife; they stood as if it had not been uttered—for both their consciences felt duty to be a bond as strong as love.

And then, on the painful silence which sank over all four, smote ten heavy strokes of the hall-clock, warning the swift passage of time—too swift to be wasted in struggle, regret, and contention. Anne rose, her pale face seeming to have that very thought written thereon.

“My dear friends, listen to me a minute. Here is one who all this time has not spoken a word, and yet the question concerns her more than any of us. Let Agatha decide.”

The old man hesitated. Perhaps in his heart he was desirous of a compromise. Or else he judged from ordinary human nature, that the pride of the young wife would ally her on his side, and so win over a will which any father, looking into Nathanael's face, could see was not to be threatened into concession.

"*Pas aux dames*," said Mr. Harper, with a pleasantly chivalric air. Then more seriously : "My daughter-in-law, choose. But remember that you stand between your husband and his father."

Agatha, thrust into so new and important a position, felt a rush of temptations to follow her own impulse. She turned appealingly to Miss Valery, but Anne's eyes were fixed on the floor. She looked at her husband, and met a gaze of doubt, anxiety, mingled with a certain desperation.

"He knows my feeling about this matter ; perhaps he thinks me a wilful child, ready to take advantage of the liberty given me. He is sure of what I shall say."

And she had half a mind to say it, as a condemnation for his so unkindly judging her ; but the girlish pettishness and recklessness went away, and a better spirit came. She sat, her right hand nervously pushing backward and forward the still unfamiliar wedding-ring, until in accidentally feeling

the symbol, she suddenly remembered the reality.

"I am a wife," she thought. "Under *all* circumstances I will do a wife's duty." And with that determination all the pleasant little follies and temptations buzzing round her heart flew away, and left her—as one always is, having resolved to consider the right and nothing else—resolute and at ease.

She said, very simply—almost childishly—taking her father-in-law's hand the while, "If you please, and if you would not be angry, I would rather do exactly as my husband likes. He knows best."

In these words she had exhausted all her boldness; and for a few minutes after had a very indistinct notion of everything, save that the Squire had walked off, not angrily but in perfect silence, leaning on Miss Valery's arm, and that she was left in the dining-room alone with Nathanael.

## CHAPTER V.

"So here is the result of family dinner-parties, and family-talks kept up till midnight!" said Mary Harper, with a little natural acerbity. "It is provoking for the mistress of a precise household to sit waiting breakfast for a whole hour."

"Mary, be charitable! We did not know you were ready, and we were so busy in my room. No laziness, was it, Agatha?"

"I think, Miss Valery, you are the very busiest woman I ever knew. How can you get through it all?"

"Only by first making up my mind, and then acting upon it at once. Your husband's plan, too, I see. We shall get on as if we

had worked together all our lives. Shall we not, my 'right-hand' Nathanael?"

He answered pleasantly ; he looked quite a new man this morning. " You are right : I seem to understand your ways as if they were my own. My first half hour's business in the memorable ' Anne's room ' at Kingcombe Holm has been sensible, like a return of old times. What a woman you are ! You might have been brought up as I was by Uncle Brian. You have just his ways."

Anne smiled, but faintly ; and with a jest about the treble compliment he had contrived to pay, let the conversation slip past to other things.

Mary and Eulalie talked excessively. They were both much scandalised by their brother's new position and intended course of life, to be put in practice immediately. Both the Miss Harpers were that sort of feminine minds which are like some kinds of flower-bells—the less fair the wider they open. Agatha wondered to see how very patient

Miss Valery was over Mary's mild platitudes and Eulalie's weak follies. But Anne's good heart seemed to cast a shield of tenderness over everybody that bore the name of Harper.

At length the young wife got tired of the after-breakfast discussion, which consisted of about a dozen different plans for the day—severally put up and knocked down again—each contradicting the other. The mild *laissez-faire* of country life in a large family was quite too much for her patience ; she longed to get up and shake everybody into common-sense and decision. But her husband and Miss Valery took everything easily—they were used to the ways at Kingcombe Holm.

“ Oh, if your sister Harriet would but come in, or Mr. Dugdale !” she whispered to her husband, “ surely they would settle something.”

“ Not at all ; they would only make matters worse. And, look !—‘ speaking of angels, one

often sees their wings.'—Is that you, Mar-maduke?"

"Ay."

Mr. Dugdale walked in composedly through the sash-window, beaming around him a sort of general smile. He never attempted any individual greeting, and Agatha, offering her hand, was met by his surprised but benevolent "Eh!" However, when required, he gave her a hearty grasp. After which, peering dreamily round the room, he pounced upon a queer-looking folio, and buried himself therein, making occasional remarks highly interesting of their kind, but slightly irrelevant to the conversation in general. Agatha amused herself with peeping at the title of the book—some abstruse work on mechanical science—and then watched the reader, thinking what great intellectual power there was in the head, and what acuteness in the eye. Also, he wore at times a wonderfully spiritual expression, strangely contrasting with the materiality of his daily existence.



No one could see that look without feeling convinced that there were beautiful depths open only to Divinest vision, in the silent and abstracted nature of Marmaduke Dugdale. Nevertheless, he could be eminently practical now and then, especially in mechanics.

“Nathanael, Nathanael! just look here. This is the very contrivance that would have suited Brian in his old clay-pits. See!”

And he began talking in a style that was Greek itself to Agatha, but to which Nathanael, leaning over his chair-back, listened intelligently, smiling now and then at his wife. It was very nice to see the liking between the two brothers-in-law—the young man so reverent to the peculiarities of the elder one, who seemed such a strange mixture of the philosopher and the child. These were the sort of traits which continually turned Agatha's heart towards her husband.

“Talking of clay-pits,” said Duke, with a

gleam of recollection, "I've something for you here!" He drew out of the voluminous mass of papers that stuffed his pockets one more carelessly scrawled than the rest. "It's a plan of my own, for giving a little help to our own clay-cutters and to the stone-cutters in the Isle of Portland, who are shockingly off in the winter sometimes. Here's Trenchard's name for more than half the money—it will make him and Free-trade popular, you know."

And Mr. Dugdale smiled with the most amiable and innocent Machiavellianism.

Nathanael shook his head mischievously, greatly to the amusement of his wife, who had stolen up to see what was going on, and stood hanging on his arm and peeping over at the illegible paper.

"Excellent plan, Marmaduke—very long-headed. You give them Christmas dinners, and they give you—votes."

"Bless you, no! That would be bribery. We"—he reflected a minute—"Oh, we

will only help those who have got no votes."

"Then the voters will all be against you."

Mr. Dugdale, much puzzled, pushed up his hair until it stood right aloft on his forehead. Soon a dawn of satisfaction reappeared. "All against us? Dear me, no! They would be pleased to see their poor neighbours helped on in the world, as you or I would, you know. They'd side at once with Trenchard and Free-trade. Come now, Nathanael, you'll assist? By the way, somebody told me you were very rich—or at least that your wife was an heiress. She looks a kind little soul. She'll put her name down under Anne Valery's here?"

And he turned to Agatha with that air of frank goodness by which Marmaduke Dugdale could coax everybody round to his own ends.

"Ay, that we will, though I am not half so rich as Miss Valery, and my husband manages all my money. Still, we have enough to help poor people—have we not?"

She appealed gaily to Mr. Harper, but he replied nothing. She persisted.

"We need not give much, since Mr. Trenchard and Miss Valery are both on the list before us. We'll give—let me see—twenty pounds. Ah, now, just go up-stairs and fetch me down twenty pounds!" said she, hanging caressingly on her husband's arm.

He looked down on her, and looked away. He had become very grave. "We will talk of this some other time, dear."

"But another time will not do. I want it now. I fear," she whispered, blushing—"I fear, before I married, I was very thoughtless and selfish. I would like to cure myself, and spend my money usefully, as Anne Valery does."

"Kind Agatha!" The words, though tender, were restrained.

"Nay, not kind at all. Charity is such a luxury."

"Too dear a luxury for every one."

She looked up, scarcely believing him to be in earnest. Her open-hearted, open-handed nature was much hurt. She said, with a bitter meaning :

“ I did not know I had such a very prudent husband.”

He took no notice, but addressed himself to Mr. Dugdale. “ Nay, Duke, you and your benevolences are too hard upon us young married people. We must tighten our purse-strings against you this time.”

Agatha's cheek flamed. “ But, if *I* wish it——”

“ Dear, it cannot be.”

Agatha moved angrily from his side, and soon after, though not so soon as to attract notice to him or herself, she quitted the room. Scarcely had she reached her own when she heard a step behind her

“ Are you angry with me, my wife, and for such a little thing ?”

Nathanael stood there, holding both her hands, and looking down upon her with a

face so kind, so regretful, so grave, that she felt ashamed of the quick storm which had ruffled her own spirit. The cause of this did seem, now, a very "little thing." She hung her head, child-like, and made no answer.

"Why is it," said Mr. Harper, putting his arm round her—"why is it that we are always having these 'little things' rising up to trouble us? Why cannot we bear with one another, and take the chance-happiness that falls to our lot? It is not much, I fear——"

She looked uneasy.

"Nay, perhaps that is chiefly my fault. I often wish Heaven had given you a better husband, Agatha."

And his countenance was so softened, mournful, and tender, that Agatha's affection returned. There was something childish and foolish in these small wranglings. They wore her heart away. For the twentieth time she vowed not to make herself unhappy, or rest-

less, or cross, but to take Nathanael's goodness as she saw it, believing in it and him. Since, according to that wise speech of Harrie's—which even Anne Valery smiled at and did not deny—the best of men were very disagreeable at times, and no man's good qualities ever came out thoroughly until he had been married for at least a year.

With a tear in her eye and a quiver on her lip, Agatha held up her young face to her husband. He kissed her, and there was peace.

But though he had made this concession, and made many others in the course of the next hour, to remove from her mind every thought of pain, still he showed not the slightest change of will regarding the cause of dispute. And perhaps in her secret heart this only caused his wife to respect him the more. It is usually the weak and erring who vacillate. Firmness of purpose, mildly carried out, implies a true motive at the root.

Agatha began to think whether her husband might not have some reason for his conduct : probably the very simple one of disliking to see his name or her own paraded in a subscription-list, or mixed up with a political clique.

Nevertheless, he puzzled her. She could not think why, with all his tenderness, he so often put his will in opposition to her own, and barred her pleasure ; why he was so slow in giving her his confidence ; why he more than once plainly stated that there was "a reason" for various disagreeable whims, yet had not told her what that reason was. All these were trivial things—yet in the early sunrise of married life the least mole-hill throws a long black shadow.

"I will be a wise woman. I will not disquiet myself in vain," said the little wife to herself, as her husband left her, in answer to repeated calls from some feminine voice which had just entered the house, and was immediately audible half over it. Harriet



Dugdale's, of course. To her—sharp-sighted and merry-tongued woman that she was—Agatha would not for worlds have betrayed anything; so, dashing cold water on her forehead to hide the very near approach to tears, she quickly descended.

Harrie was in a state of considerable indignation, mixed with laughter. "I never knew such people as you are! and certainly never was there the like of my Duke there. He set off to fetch you all to C—— Castle—his own proposition. I waited an hour and a half—then I took the pony to see after you—and lo!—there he is, sitting quite at his ease. Oh, Duke—Duke!"

She shook her riding-whip at him twice before she disturbed him from his book.

"Eh, Missus—what do'ee want, my child?"

"Want? Don't you see what a passion we're all in? Abuse him, Anne—Agatha—Nathanael! Do! I've no patience with

him. Didn't he say himself that he would take us all to C—— Castle? Oh, you—you——” And Harrie looked unutterable things.

Mr. Dugdale gazed round placidly. “Really, now, that's a pity! Never mind, Missus! I only forgot.” And patting her hand with ineffable gentleness and good-humour, he opened his book again.

“Oh, you—you”—here she put on a melo-dramatic scowl—“you inconceivably provoking, misty, oblivious, incomprehensible old darling!”

And springing upon the back of his chair, Harrie hugged him to a degree that compelled the unfortunate philosopher to renounce his book. He took the caresses very patiently, and “smiled with superior love” upon his merry wife.

“That'll do, Missus! Eh—and before folk, too! Now don't'ee, my child!”

And shaking himself, hair and all, into something like order, he picked up the folio,

tucked it under his arm, and wended his way through the window slowly down the lawn.

Agatha glanced at her husband, who stood talking to Miss Valery. She wondered what Nathanael would say if *she* were to take a leaf out of his sister's book, and treat her own liege lord after the uncereemonious fashion of Harrie Dugdale!

"There—off he goes—quite cross, no doubt. (He was smiling as benevolently as if he could embrace the whole world.) But we must catch him at the stables. I brought White-star galloping after me, and Duke will rouse up when he sees his beloved horse. You shall take my pony, Agatha. Of course you can ride?"

Agatha could—in a London riding-school and London parks. She had her doubts about the country, but felt strongly inclined to try; for Mrs. Dugdale had entered Kingcombe Holm like a breath of keen fresh air, putting life and spirit into everybody. Nathanael made no opposition, only he insisted

on Mary's quiet grey mare being substituted for Harrie's skittish pony.

"I shall ride with you part way," said he, "and then leave you in Mr. Dugdale's charge, while I stay at Kingcombe."

"Why so?"

"I have business there."

Still the same weary "business," which he never explained or talked about, yet which always seemed to rise up like a bugbear on their pleasures, until Agatha was sick of the sound of the word!

She turned away, and put herself altogether under Mrs. Dugdale's care to be equipped for the ride.

Anne Valery, coming in with her quiet common sense, succeeded in making up the party, which, with one exception, Harrie had left to make itself up according to its own discretion. When Mrs. Harper descended, she found all settled for the spending of a day at C—— Castle, in pic-nic style—glorious and free—with a moonlight canter home

in the evening. No one was omitted except the Squire, who with considerable dignity declined such *al fresco* amusements; and Anne Valery, who promised to peep in upon them as she passed C—— Castle on her way to her own house, after spending a few hours with Elizabeth.

Agatha had never been on horseback since she was married. It made her feel like a girl again, and brought back all the wild spirits of her youth, now repressed in propriety by her changed life—until sometimes she hardly knew herself, or fancied she was growing into that object of her former scorn, an ordinary young lady. She cast the subdued and meek “Mrs. Locke Harper” to the winds, and dashed wildly back for this day at least into “Agatha Bowen.”

Her husband, putting her on her horse, with many injunctions, was surprised to see her give him a careless nod and dart off delightedly, as if she and the grey mare had wings. The Dugdales followed, a wild

pair, for Marmaduke was quite another being on horseback.

“Look at him, Agatha”—and Harrie’s laugh ringing on the wind caused the mild grey mare to seem rather restless in her mind. “Did you think my Duke could ride as he does? He never looks so well as on horseback. He is a perfect Thessalian!”

Agatha was amused to find classic lore in Harrie Dugdale, and she gave most cordial admiration to Duke. “He is a magnificent rider ; he sits the horse just as if he were born to it.”

“Bless him! so he was. He rode his father’s horses at four years old, and went hunting at fourteen. And he has such a beautiful temper, and such a firm will besides—that he could manage the wildest brute in the county. See there!”

White-star had become rather obstreperous, showing his spirit ; his master carelessly leant down, giving him a box on each ear, just as if the stately blood horse had been

a naughty child ; then composedly rode him back to the two ladies.

“ Harrie ! Missus ! do’ee come on ! Nathanael is behind, all right. Come along ! ”

He gave his wife’s pony a switch, and off they dashed, she laughing merrily, and he galloping away with such ease and grace that Agatha could not take her eyes off him.

She looked after them with a vague sense of envy,—this odd married pair, in whose union so many things appeared unequal and peculiar, except for one thing—the love which hallowed and perfected all. When her own husband came up, she, unwilling to talk, and dreading above all that his quick eye should detect anything amiss in her, pushed her horse forward, and calling to Nathanael to follow, rode on after the Dugdales.

Ere they had ridden far, all her wild spirits came back again, and all her wifely feelings too, for her husband seemed as happy

as herself, and entered into all her frolics. They swept along like two children, across the breezy moors, purple and fragrant, down by the hilly sheep-paths, lying bare in autumn sunshine. Nathanael proved himself almost as good a horseman as Duke Dugdale; a great pleasure to Agatha, for of all things women do like a man to be manly. Nay, once, in the descent of a hill so steep that a Cockney equestrian would have been frightened out of his seven senses, Nathanael's prudent daring stood out in such bold relief that Agatha was perforce reminded of the day when he snatched little Jemmie from the bear, the first day when her liking and respect had been awakened towards him. She hinted this, and said how pleasant it was to feel that one's husband was, as she expressed it, "a man that could take care of one."

"And how very foolish and helpless town-folk — drawing-room gentlemen, appear in the country! I wonder," and she could not help telling him the comical idea, though not



very complimentary to her husband's brother—"I wonder how Major Harper would look on horseback?"

"What did you say? The wind blew that sentence away."

She hardly liked to repeat it exactly, but said something about Major Harper and his coming down to Dorset.

Nathanael spurred his horse forward without replying. A minute afterwards he returned to his wife's side, bringing her a great bunch of heather, with yellow gorse mixed, and made jokes about the Dorsetshire saying, "When gorse is out of bloom kissing's out of season." And evermore he looked secretly at her, to notice if she laughed and was happy, had roses on her cheeks, and pleasure in her eyes. Seeing this, the husband appeared contented and at ease.

They and the Dugdales rode merrily into Kingcombe, much to that good town's astonishment. The equestrian quartette at

Marmaduke's door was a sight that the worthy inhabitants of that sleepy street would not get over for a week. Everybody gathered at doors and windows, and a small group of farmers at the market quadrangle stared with all their eyes. The sensation created was enormous, and likewise the crowd,—almost as dense as a wandering juggler gathers in a quiet suburban London street! Agatha, passing through it, laughed till she could laugh no longer.

Her husband, pleased at her gaiety, came to lift her off her horse.

“Not a bit of it!” Mrs. Dugdale cried. “Keep your seat, Agatha; no time to lose; on we go in a minute, when Duke has been to get his letters. Here, Brian, my pet.”—There had rushed out round her horse a cluster of infantine Dugdales.—“Lift Brian up here, Uncle Nathanael, and I'll give him a canter. Bravo! He's Pa's own boy, born for a rider! Come along, Auntie Agatha.”

Agatha would willingly have followed down the street. She was amused by the daring of the mother and the boy, and amused especially by her new title of "Auntie Agatha."

"Do let me go, Mr. Harper; I don't want to dismount, indeed."

"But I have something to say to you—just a few words. We must decide to-day about the house, you know."

"Never mind the house; I had rather not think about it." And the mere shadow of past vexation still vexed her. "Ah!" she added, entreatingly, "do be good to me—do let me enjoy myself!"

"I would not prevent you for the world." He dropped her bridle with a sigh, and turned back among his little nephews.

Fred had coaxed the horse from the groom, and Gus was bent on mounting; there was a dreadful struggle, and angry cries for Uncle Nathanael. In the midst of it Uncle Nathanael appeared, like an angel of

peace, and setting the boys one behind another on his horse's back, led the animal up and down carefully.

Agatha looked after them, thinking how kind and good her husband was. She wished she had not refused so hastily such a simple request; she began to think herself a wretch for ever contradicting him in anything.

The little party started again, increased by the arrival of the family carriage from Kingcombe Holm, wherein sat Mary and Eulalie. To these were speedily added the three young Dugdales, all in high glee. And it spoke well for the Miss Harpers, whom Agatha was disposed to like least of her husband's relatives, that they made very lenient and kindly aunts to those obstreperous boys.

Agatha was crossing the bridge which bounded South-street, trying to make her horse stand still while Mr. Dugdale pointed out the identical red cliff where the Danes drew up their ships, and laughing with Harrie

at the notion of how terribly frightened the quiet souls in Kingcombe would be at such an incursion now, when Nathanael came on foot to his wife's side.

"Why did you start without speaking to me, dear?"

"I could not help it; I thought you were gone. You will come after us soon?" And she felt angry with herself for having momentarily forgotten him.

"I will come when I have settled this business of the house. You understand, Agatha? I am free to decide? You will not blame me afterwards?"

"Oh, no—no!" His extreme seriousness of manner jarred with her youthful spirits. She did not think or care about what he did, so that for this day only he let her be gay and happy. From some incomprehensible cause, his very love seemed to hang over her like a cloud, and so it had been from the beginning. She did so long to dash out into the sunshine of her careless, girlish life,

and scamper over the beautiful country with Harrie Dugdale.

“ Oh, no !” she repeated, only wishing to satisfy him. “ Do just as you like, and come onward soon ; and oh, do let us be cheerful and merry !”

“ We will !” His bright look as she patted his shoulder—a very venturesome act—gave her much cheer ; and when, after she had cantered a good way down the road, she turned and saw him still leaning on the bridge looking after her, her heart throbbed with pleasure. Despite all his reserves and peculiarities, and her own conscious failings, there was one thing to which she clung as to a root of comfort that would never be taken away, and would surely bear blossom and fruit afterwards—the belief that her husband truly loved her.

“ If so,” she thought, “ I suppose all will come right in time, and Agatha Harper will be as happy as, or happier than Agatha Bowen.”

So on she went, yielding to the delicious

excitement of being on horseback. She was also much interested by the country round about, which appeared to her as old, desolate, and strange, as if she had been a Thane's daughter riding across the moors to the gates of that renowned castle which, as Harrie declared, putting on the physiognomy of some school-child drawling out a history-lesson, "was celebrated for being the residence of the ancient Saxon kings."

"And this was the place," continued she in the same tone, pointing to an old gate-post—"this was the place where His Majesty's most illustrious horse did stop when His Majesty's most sainted body was dragged along by the leg, in the stirrup, on account of the wound given him when he was adrinking at the castle-door, by his stepmother, Queen Elfrida. All of which is to be seen to the present day."

Agatha first laughed at this comical view of the subject, then she felt a little repugnance at hearing that stern old tragedy so

lightly treated. As she walked her horse along the road, which might have been, and probably was, the very same Saxon highway as in those times, she thought of the wounded horseman dashing out from between those green hills, and of the murdered body dropping slowly, slowly from the saddle, dragged in dust, and beat against stones, until the woman that loved him—for even a king might have had some woman that loved him—would not have known the face she thought so fair.

It was an idle fancy, but beneath it her tears were rising; chiefly for thinking, not of "The Martyr," but of the woman— whoever she was—(Agatha had not historical erudition enough to remember if King Edward had a wife)—to whom that day's tragedy might have brought a lifetime's doom. She began to shudder—to feel that she too was a wife—to understand dimly what a wife's love might come to be—also something of a wife's terrors. She wished—it was foolish enough, but she did wish that Nathanael had not been



riding on horseback, or else that, in picturing to herself the dead head of the Martyr dragged along the road, she did not always see it with long fair hair. And then she wondered if these horrible fancies indicated the dawning of that feeling which she had deceived herself into believing she already possessed. Was she beginning to find out the difference between that quiet response to secured affection, that pleasant knowledge of being loved, and the strong, engrossing, self-existent attachment which Anne Valery described—the passion which has but one object, one interest, one joy, in the whole wide world?

Was she beginning really *to love* her husband?

The answer to that question involved so much, both of what had been, and what was yet to come, that Agatha dared not ponder over it.

“Mrs. Harper! Mrs. Harper!” She mused no longer, but hurried on after the Dugdales.

It was not to point out the Castle that Harrie had been so vociferous, but to show a place which she evidently deemed far more interesting.

"Do you see that white house far among the trees? That's where my Duke was born. He lived there in peace and quietness till he got acquainted with Uncle Brian, and came to Kingcombe Holm and fell in love with me."

"How did he do it? I want to know what is the fashion of such things in Dorset."

"How did Duke fall in love with me? Really I can't tell. I was fifteen or so—a mere baby! He first gave me a doll, and then he wanted to marry me!"

"But how did he make love, or 'propose,' as they call it?" persisted Agatha, to whom the idea of Marmaduke Dugdale in that character was irresistibly funny.

"Make love? Propose? Bless you, my dear, he never did either! Somehow it all

came quite naturally. We belonged to one another."

The very phrase Anne Valery had used ! It made Nathanael's wife rather thoughtful. She wondered what was the feeling like, when people "belonged to one another."

But she had no time for meditation; for now the great grey ruin loomed in sight, and everybody, including the shouting boys in the carriage behind, was eager to point it out, especially when Agatha made the lamentable confession that she had never seen a ruined castle in her life before.

"And you might go all over England and not find such another as this," said Mr. Dugdale, riding up to her with a smile of great satisfaction. "Nobody thinks much of it in these parts, and few antiquarians ever come and poke about it. Perhaps it's as well. They couldn't find out more than we know already. But no!"—and his clear eye, taking in the noble old ruin arched over by

the broad sky, assumed its peculiar dreamy expression—"We don't know anything. Nobody knows anything. It's a wonderful world!"

Agatha looked around. On the top of a smooth conical hill, each side of which was guarded by other two hills equally smooth and bare, rose the wreck of the magnificent fortress, enough of the walls remaining to show its extent and plan. Its destroyer had been—not Father Time, who does his work quietly and gracefully—but that worse spoiler, man. Huge masses of masonry, hurled from the summit, lay in the moat beneath, fixed as they had been for centuries, with vegetation growing over them. Some of the walls, undermined and shaken from their foundations, took strange, oblique angles, yet refused to fall. Marks of cannon-balls were indented on the stone-work of the battered gateway, which still remained a gateway—probably the very same under

which Queen Elfrida, "fair and false," had offered to her son the stirrup-cup.

The general impression left on the mind was not that of natural decay, solemn and holy, but of sudden destruction, coming unawares, and struggled against, as a man in the flower of life struggles with mortality. There was something very melancholy about the ruined fortress left on the hill-top in sight of the little town close below, where its desolation was unheeded. Agatha, sensitive, enthusiastic, and easily impressed, grew silent, and wondered that her companions could laugh so carelessly, even when passing under the grey portal into the very precincts of the deserted castle.

"We shall not find a soul here," said Harrie; "scarcely anybody ever comes at this season, except when our Kingcombe Odd-Fellows Club have a pic-nic on this bowling-green; or schoolboys get together and climb up the ivy to frighten the jackdaws

—my husband has done it many a time—haven't you, Duke?"

"I see, mamma," vaguely responded Duke, who was busy lifting his boys down from the carriage, with a paternal care and tenderness beautiful to see. He then, with one little fellow on his shoulder, another holding his hand, and a third clinging to his coat-tails, strode off up the green ascent, without paying the slightest attention to Mrs. Harper. Which dereliction from the rules of politeness it never once came into her mind to notice or to blame.

"There they go! Nobody minds me; it's all Pa!" said Mrs. Dugdale, with an assumption of wrath; a very miserable pretence, while her look was so happy and fond. "You see, Agatha, what you'll come to—after ten years' matrimony!"

Agatha's heart was so full she could not laugh but sighed, yet it was not with unhappiness.

She and Harrie wandered over the castle

together, for the two Miss Harpers did not approve of climbing. The little boys and "Pa" reappeared now and then at all sorts of improbable and terrifically dangerous corners, and occasionally Mrs. Dugdale made frantic darts after them. Especially when they were all seen standing on one of the topmost precipices, the father giving a practical scientific lesson on the momentum of falling bodies; in illustration of which Harrie declared he would certainly throw little Brian out of his arms, in a fit of absence of mind, thoroughly believing the child was a stone.

At last, when their excitement had fairly worn itself out, and even Mrs. Dugdale's energetic liveliness had come to a dead stop in consequence of a fit of sleepiness and crossness on the part of Brian—Agatha roamed about the old castle by herself; creeping into all the queer nooks with a childish pleasure, mounting impassable walls so as to find the highest point of view. She always had a

great delight in climbing, and in feeling herself at the top of everything.

It was such a strange afternoon too, grey, soft, warm, the sun having long gone in and left an atmosphere of pleasant cloudiness, tender and dim, the shadowing over of a fading day, which nevertheless foretels no rain, but often indicates a beautiful day to-morrow. Somehow or other, it made Agatha think of Miss Valery ; nor was she surprised when, as suddenly as if she had dropped out of the sky, Anne was seen approaching.

“ Let me help you up these stones. How good of you to come, and how tired you seem !”

“ Oh no, I shall be rested in a minute. But I am not quite so young as you, my dear.”

She came up, and leaned against the ivy-wall that Agatha had climbed, which was on the opposite side of the hill to the bowling-green, the gathering-spot of the little



party. It was a nook of thorough solitude and desolation, nothing being visible from it but the widely-extended flat of country, looking seaward, though the sea itself was not in view.

"Why did you climb so high?" said Agatha, as earnestly regarding her friend, she perceived more than ever before the difference in their years, and felt strongly tempted to wrap her strong young arms round Miss Valery's waist, and support her with even a daughter's care.

"I shall be well presently," Anne repeated, with cheerfulness. "I have not climbed up to this spot for many years. I thought I would like to come here once again."

She sat down, on a flat stone raised upon two others.

"What a comfortable seat! It might have been made for you."

"It was—long ago. No one has disturbed it since. Come, my dear."

She drew Agatha beside her—there was just room for two ; and they sat in silence, looking at the view, except that Agatha sometimes cast her eyes about rather restlessly. It was a magical answer to her thoughts when Anne observed :

“ I met your husband as I drove through Kingcombe. He desired me to tell you he would be here ere long. How very thoughtful and good he is !”

Agatha said “ Yes ”—a mere “ Yes,” quiet and low.

Miss Valery made no further remark, but sat a long time, absently gazing over the low-lying sweep of country which gradually melted into a greyness that looked like sea.

“ Is it the sea ?” asked Mrs. Harper.

“ No, it lies yonder, behind the hill opposite—where there is the smoke of the furze burning. From that spot I should think one could trace the line of coast almost to Weymouth. Do you remember ever seeing Weymouth ?”

"No! how could I?" returned Agatha, surprised by the suddenness of the question, and its form. "You forget, I never was in Dorsetshire before."

Anne said something, either in jest or earnest, about one's often fancying one has seen places in a previous existence, and changed the theme by pointing out the view on the other hand. "My house, Thornhurst, lies in that direction. You must come and see me soon, and we will talk more pleasantly than I can do to-day. It is so strange to be sitting here with Mrs. Locke Harper."

"Why so? What makes you so often call me by that name?"

"Only a whim I have. But is it not a good name—a beautiful name? Ah, you child!—you poor little one! To think of *you* becoming Mrs. Locke Harper!"

There was a pathos—a kind of tender retrospection in Anne Valery's manner as she touched the brown curls and smoothed the neat dress, which—riding hat and skirt

having been laid aside or tucked up—made a pretty mountain-maiden out of Nathanael's wife. Agatha never could understand the peculiar fondness with which Miss Valery sometimes regarded her—to-day especially. She seemed constantly on the point of saying something—which she never did say. At last she rose from the stone seat.

“We will talk another day. We must go now.” Yet she lingered. “Just let us stand here, in this exact spot, and look at the view.” She looked—her eyes absorbing it from every point, as one drinks in, for the last time, a long-familiar draught of landscape beauty. “My dear!”

The whisper was strangely soft—even solemn.

“You will remember, dear, it was I that brought you here first. You'll come here sometimes, will you not?”

“Oh, very often indeed! It is a delicious place.”

“I thought so, when I was your age.

And you'll not forget the stone seat, Agatha? I hope no one will disturb it. Good-by! poor old stone."

Saying this in a whisper, she stooped and patted it with her hand—the thin white hand that might once have been so round, pretty, and young. The act, natural even to childishness, might have made Agatha smile, but for a certain something about Miss Valery that invested with dignity even her simplicities. So, merely echoing "Good-by, old stone!" she followed Anne down the slope.

After a loud-lamenting adieu, especially from the Dugdale boys, Miss Valery mounted her little carriage and drove away into the gathering shadow—Agatha knew not where.

"What a good woman she is! I wish we were all like her!" she said, thoughtfully.

"My dear, nobody can be, especially with a husband and four children. It is a blessing to society in general that Anne Valery never married."

"But people do marry late in life some-

times. So may she. Do you think she will?"

"Can't say! Don't know! Very mysterious!" ejaculated Harrie. "My brother Fred once hinted—and Fred was a very fascinating young fellow when I was a child—— But all that belongs to the year One. I'll hold my tongue."

Agatha had too much delicacy to inquire further. Still, it seemed very odd that there should be a general impression of Anne's early attachment to Major Harper, in contradistinction to the old Squire's regretful hint that she had refused his eldest son. But these scraps of romance, so far back in the past, were useless searching.

"An excellent woman is Anne Valery," continued Harrie—"really excellent: but sometimes rather a bore to her friends who have families. My Duke often forgets he has four children to provide for, when he listens to her charitable schemes. 'Twas but the other day he and she were mad about some

starving Cornish miners that she sent poor Mr. Wilson to look after."

"Ah, I remember," cried Agatha, now interested in things which she had before heard indifferently. She was thirsting for some opportunity of doing good—of redeeming the long waste of idle years and unemployed fortune. "Do tell me about those miners."

"Little to tell, my dear. Only philanthropic ideas about helping poor wretches that had been thrown out of work by some cheating speculators shutting up the mines. Anne sent Wilson to find out who the man was, and what could be done. After that I never heard any more of it, nor did my husband either.—Stop—don't run and question him! For goodness' sake let the nonsense drop out of his poor dear head."

Agatha, thus rebuffed, ceased her inquiries, but she inwardly resolved to find out all about the Cornish miners, and consult with her husband about assisting them. He could

not object to this good deed—it should be done as privately as ever he liked—she would take care not even to make mention of it before people, as in the matter of the subscription. And surely, though he was strange and had his peculiar notions, Nathanael was generous at heart, and would not thwart her in anything really essential, especially when she only wished to follow in the steps of Anne Valery, and use worthily her large fortune.

With these thoughts elevating and cheering her mind, she sat and watched for her husband until he came. She was so glad to see him that she quite forgot to inquire about the house. He seemed at first expectant of her questions, and rather grave, but at last gave himself up to the general merry mood.

Once only, when they were riding homeward side by side, the fading sunset before them, and the low moon hiding herself behind the great black hill of C—— Castle, Nathanael suddenly said :



“ My dear Agatha, perhaps you would like me to tell you——”

“ No,” she cried, with a quick instinct of reluctance. “ Tell me nothing to-night. Let us be happy for this one day.”

Her husband sighed, and was silent.

## CHAPTER VI.

"AGATHA, will you come out and walk with me?"

"Do you not see it is raining?"

He had not indeed, though he had stood at the window in meditation ever since breakfast-time. As for Agatha, she had been so tired with her excursion the previous day that she had done nothing but sleep, and had scarcely opened her lips to her husband or to any one. Now, on this rainy day, she felt the reaction of her high spirits—was dull, dreamy; wished her husband would come and talk to her, and "make a baby" of her. She could not think why he stood at that odious window, pondering, counting rain-

drops apparently, and then made the unaccountable proposition of a walk.

"Raining, is it?" He looked up at the murky sky. "What a change from last night," he said, gloomily.

"I did not know you were so subject to elemental influences?"

"We all are, more or less; but I was just then thinking about other things than what I spoke of. My dear wife, I want to talk to you very much. Where shall we go, so as not to be interrupted?"

"Anywhere you like," said she, resigning herself to her fate and to a long argument, which she supposed was about the new house. She had a floating suspicion that Nathanael was determined to settle the matter soon, and that she should have a hard struggle between the pretty house she liked, and Mr. Wilson's cottage, which her husband so unaccountably preferred. This was a matter in which she could not yield, come what might. There-

fore the "anywhere you like" was in rather an ungracious manner. He seemed determined not to observe this.

"Suppose we go into the conservatory;—you have never seen it. But put on something to keep you warm."

He wrapped Mary's crimson garden-shawl over her head—clumsily enough, for Mr. Harper was not a "ladies' man;" his whole character and habits of life being in curious opposition to the extreme delicacy which Nature had externally stamped upon his appearance. Pausing, he held his wife at arms' length, gazing at her admiringly.

"Will that do? What a gipsy you look, with your red shawl and brown face!"

"Pawnee-face, you know! Do you remember how you once called me so, and how your brother——"

"Come, let us go," he said abruptly, and hurried her through the drawing-rooms. Agatha was rather hurt that his aspect should

change so cloudily, and that he should thus quench her little reminiscences of courtship-days, so dear to every happy wife, and gradually becoming dearer even to herself. As they entered the conservatory, she shivered with an uncomfortable sense of gloom.

“What a large, bare place! Even the vines look cheerless—and where have they put all the flowers? What a shame to send them away, and turn it into a billiard-room.”

“It was done years ago, to please—my brother”—(Agatha was amazed at the hard tone of that tender fraternal word—so can the sense of words alter in the saying)—“and my father will not have it removed.”

“He must have been very fond of your brother,” said Agatha, as with a woman’s natural leaning to the injured side, she thought of Major Harper—his gaiety and his good-nature. She wondered why Nathanael was so rigid and cold in his forced and rare mentioning of his brother’s name. As she pon-

dered, her eyes took a serious shadow in their depths.

“What are you thinking about, Agatha?”

The suddenness of the question—the consciousness that she might vex Nathanael did she answer it—made her hesitate, blushing vividly—nay, painfully.

“No, don’t tell me. I don’t want to hear.” Her husband, in words scarcely intelligible, added: “Forgive me! I shall not blame you; I never did.”

“How strange you are! I don’t know what you mean, Mr. Harper.”

“Nothing. Forget I said anything. Nothing, believe me, my wife! You are my wife now—mine—mine!” and for a moment he pressed her hand tightly. “In time”—he relinquished his hold with a sad smile—“in time, Agatha, I hope we shall become used to one another; perhaps even grow into a contented, sedate married couple.”

“Do you think so?” Alas! such was not her thought—not the thought which had

dawned when she paused, shuddering, over the tale of King Edward the Martyr and the woman that loved him. Not the dim hope, daily rising, of an Eden not altogether lost, even though she had married so rashly and blindly—a hope that this might have been only the burying of her foolish girlish dream of love, which must needs die in order to be raised up again in a different form and in a new existence.

Somewhat heavy-hearted, Agatha sat down on a raised bench that looked down on the battered and decaying billiard-table, listening to the rain that pattered on the glass roof above the vine-leaves—wondering how old were the ragged-looking, flowerless, fruitless orange-trees that were ranged on either side, the only other specimens of vegetation left. Evidently nobody at Kingcombe Holm cared much for flowers.

“I think we will quit this dull place. You do not seem to like it?” said Mr. Harper, kindly.

"Oh, yes, I like it well enough. I like the rain falling, falling, and the vine-branches crushing themselves against the panes. They'll never ripen, never—poor things! They are dying for sun, and it will not—will not shine!"

"Agatha, what do you mean?"

"I don't clearly know what I mean. Never mind. Talk to me about—whatever it was that you brought me to unfold. Be quick—I have not much stock of patience, you know."

"Do not laugh, for I am rather serious. I wanted to talk to you about our new house."

"Our new house! Where and what like is it to be, I wonder!"

"Do you not recollect?"

"No; the two we looked at would not do," said Agatha, determinedly. She guessed what was coming—that the discussion about Wilson's cottage, which Nathanael seemed so to have set his heart upon, was about to



be renewed. But she would never consent to that—never! “The house I liked you did not approve of,” she continued, observing her husband’s silence. “The other I could not think of for a moment.”

“But supposing there was no alternative, since we must settle at once?”

“This is the first time you have condescended to inform me of that necessity.”

“If,” he went on, taking no notice of her sharp speech, but speaking with the extreme gentleness of one who himself feels tenfold the pain he is compelled to inflict—“if, as I told you yesterday, we ought to form our plans immediately; and since Kingcombe being such a small place, there is at present no choice left us but those two houses——”

“Build one! We are rich enough.”

“Not quite.” His eyes dropped, almost like those of guilt. After a pause, he cried out violently:

“Agatha, a secret at one’s heart is like

the very devil himself sitting grinning there. Have patience with me just for a little while."

"What are you talking about? What have you done?"

"Nothing," said he, seeing the necessity of calming himself, and accomplishing it at once. "Nothing to harm your peace, my little wife. I have committed no greater crime than——"

"Well!"

"Than having taken Wilson's cottage."

He tried by smiling to teach her to make light of it—perhaps because it was a thing so light to him. But Agatha was enraged beyond endurance.

"You have absolutely taken it—that mean, wretched hovel, that I told you I hated ;—taken it secretly, without my knowledge or consent!"

"You mistake there. I told you we were obliged to decide yesterday ; you were unwilling to consult with me, and at last—do

you remember? you left the decision in my hands. I merely believed your own words, and knowing the necessity of acting upon them, did so. I cannot think I was wrong."

"Oh, no! Not at all!" cried Agatha, laughing wildly. "It was only like you—under-handed in stealing my few pleasures—very frank and open when you can rule. Never honest or candid with me, except to my punishment. A kind, generous husband, truly!"

These, and a torrent more of bitter words she poured out. She never knew till now the passion, the galling sarcasm, there was in her nature. She felt a longing to hate—a wish to wound. Every time she looked at her husband, there seemed a demon rising up within her—that demon which lurks strangely enough in the heart's closest and tenderest depths.

"Cannot you speak!" she cried, going up to him. "Anything is better than that wicked silence. Speak!"

“Agatha!”

“No—I’ll not hear you. See what you have done—how you have made me disgrace myself”—and she almost sobbed.—“Never in my life was I in a passion before.”

“Is it my fault then?” said he, mournfully.

“Yes, yours. It is you who stir up all these bad feelings in me. I was a good girl, a happy girl, before you married me.”

“Was it so? Then you shall be held blameless. Poor child—poor child!”

The unutterable regret, the entire prostration, stung her to the heart, and silenced her for the moment ; but speedily she burst out again :

“You call me a child—so perhaps I am, in years ; but you should have thought of that before. You married me, and made me a woman. You took away my gay childish heart, and yet in all humiliating things you still treat me like a child.”

"Do I?" He answered mechanically, out of thoughts that lay deep down, far below the surface of his wife's bitter words. These last awoke in him not one ray of anger—not even when at last, in a fit of uncontrollable petulance, she tore his hand from before his eyes, bidding him look at her—if he dared!

"Yes, I dare." And the look she courted arose steady, sorrowful, like that of a man who turns his eyes upward, hopeless yet faithful, out of a wrecked ship. "Whatever has been, or may come, God knows that, from the first, I did love you, Agatha."

Wherefore had he used the word "did!" Why could she not smother down the unwonted pang, the new craving? Or rather, why could she not throw herself in his arms and cry out, "Do you love me—do you love me *now*?" Pride—pride only—the restless wild nature upon which his reserve fell like water upon fire, without

the blending spirit of conscious and tried love which makes two opposite temperaments so constantly result in union.

Nevertheless, she was somewhat soothed, and began to compress the mass of imaginary wrongs into the one little wrong which had originated it all.

“What made you take a liking to that miserable house? I hate small rooms—I cannot breathe in them—I have never been used to a little house. Why must I now? I am not going to be extravagant—nobody could be if they tried, in a poor place like Kingcombe. Since you *will* insist on our living there, and *will* carry out your cruel pride of independence——”

“Cruel—oh, my wife!” He absolutely groaned.

“Wishing no extravagance, I do wish for comfort—perhaps some little elegance—as I have had all my life.”

“You shall have it still, Agatha,” her hus-

band muttered. "I will coin my heart's blood into gold but you shall have it."

"Now you are talking barbarously! Or else—how very, very wrong am I! What can be the reason that we torture each other so?"

"Fate!" he cried, pacing wildly up and down. "Fate! that has netted us both up to our own misery—nay, worse—to make us the misery of one another. Yet how could I know? You seemed a young simple girl, free to love—I felt sure I could make you love me. Poor dupe that I was! Oh, why did I ever see you, Agatha Bowen!"

He snatched his wife on his knee, and kissed her repeatedly—madly—just as he had done on the morning of their wedding-day; never since! Then he let her go—almost with coldness.

"There—I will not vex you. I must not be foolish any more."

Foolish! He thought it foolish to show that he loved her! Without replying, Agatha sat down on the bench where her husband placed her. He might say what he liked: she was very patient now.

He began to explain his reasons for taking the house; that he had naturally more acquaintance with worldly matters than she had; that whatever their income, it was advisable for young people to begin housekeeping prudently, since it was easy to increase small beginnings, while of all outward domestic horrors there was nothing greater than the horror of running into debt. When he talked thus, at once with wisdom and gentleness, Agatha began to forgive him.

"After all," said she, brightening, "your prudence—which I might call by a harder word, but I'll be good now—your prudence is only restraining me in my little pleasures, and I don't much mind. But if



you ever tried to restrain me in a matter of kindness, as you did yesterday, only I guessed the motive——”

“Did you?”

“There—don’t look so startled and displeased. I saw you did not like the *éclat* of political charities. But another time, if I want to do good—like Anne Valery, only in a very, very much smaller way—Hark! what is that noise?”

It was a decent-looking working-man, standing out in the pouring rain, watching them through the panes, and rattling angrily at the locked conservatory-door.

“What a fierce eye! It looks quite wolfish. What can he want with us?”

“I will go and see. Some labourer wanting work, probably; but the fellow has no business to come beckoning and interrupting. Stay here, Agatha.”

“No—I will come with you.” And she tripped after her husband, the momentary

content of her heart creating a longing to do good—a sort of tithe of happiness thankfully paid to Heaven.

Nathanael unfastened the glass-door, not without annoyance ; for, unlike his wife, *his* joy-tithe was not yet due.

“ What do you want, my good fellow ? ”

“ Some o’ th’ Harpers.”

“ Indeed ! Are you after work ? You don’t look like one of the clay-cutters. Where do you come from ? ”

“ I be Darset, I be; but I comed fra Carn-wall.”

“ From where ? ” asked Agatha, puzzled by the provincialism, and attracted at once by the man’s intelligent face, and by a keen, misery-stricken, hungry look, which she had truly called “ wolfish.”

“ I be comed fra the miners in Carnwall,” reiterated the man, raising his voice threateningly. “ They sent I back to Darset to see some o’ th’ Harpers.”

“ You must go in, Agatha; it is cold. I

cannot have you standing here. Go—quick.” And Agatha was astonished to see how pallid and eager her husband looked, and how anxious he seemed to get her out of the way.

“ No, thank you. I am not cold at all. I want to hear this man. Perhaps he is one of the poor miners Miss Valery spoke of at Wheal—what was it ?”

“ I be comed fra Wheal Caroline, Missus, and I do want one o’ th’ Harpers. There be the old ’un at the window ! Thick’s the man for we.”

And he was hurrying off to the bow-window of the Squire’s room, which was alongside of the conservatory. But Nathanael called him back imperatively.

“ Stay, fellow. My father has nothing to do with the mines—it is I. I’ll speak to you presently.—Some business of Anne’s,” he explained hastily to his wife. “ Leave us, dear.”

“ Why do you make me go in ? I want to

hear about the poor miners ; I want to help them, as well as Anne Valery."

"Do'ee help we, Missus !" implored the man, softened by a woman's kind looks. "Do'ee give we some'at to keep 'un fra starving !"

"Starving !" cried Agatha in horror. And even her husband's anxiety was for the moment quelled in the deep pity which overspread his countenance.

"It be nigh that, I tell'ee." And the miner, reviving some old refinement instinctively in a lady's presence, softened his "Darset" so that Mrs. Harper could understand him. "Us be no cheats—there be other folk as has cheated we. Fine grand folk, as knew nowt o' the mines, but shut 'un up, and paid no money."

"How wicked !"

"But I be come to find 'un out," cried the man fiercely, as his eye lit on Nathanael. "For I do know thick fine folk. And I tell'ee——"

" Silence! you forget you are speaking before a lady. Wait for me, and I will talk with you."

" Will'ee, Mister? Don't'ee cheat, now!" said the miner, with a rude attempt at a sneer.

The young man's cheek flushed, but he said very quietly—with the quietness of an honest man, and a gentleman:

" I promise you, I will speak with you here in half an hour. I am Nathanael Harper—Mr. Harper's youngest son."

After a minute's keen observation, the miner pulled off his cap respectfully. " Thank'ee, sir! You beant *he*, I see. But you be th' old Squire's son, and—I be Darset, I be!"

Another bow—the involuntary respect to the ancient county family from honest labour born upon its ancestral sod, and the man leaned exhausted against the ragged stem of one of the old vines.

" Missus," he said, looking up hungrily—at

the lady this time—"Missus, do'ee gie 'un a bit o' bread!"

Agatha, full of compassion, was eager to send the servants, or take him into the kitchen, or even fetch him his dinner with her own hands. Mr. Harper interfered.

"I will bring him some food myself. Stay here, my man; don't stir hence. Remember, you have nothing to do with my father."

There was a warning severity in the tone which annoyed Agatha. Why did her husband speak harshly to the poor miner? But men were never so tender-hearted as women.

Still she obeyed Mr. Harper's evident wish that she should go away; and spent the time in Elizabeth's room, telling her of this little incident.

Miss Harper listened with all the quick intelligence of her bright eyes. The only remark she made was:

"What could have led this miner to come back to Dorsetshire after our family?"

Agatha had never thought of this, indeed

she did not want to think. Her heart was brimming with charity. She longed to empty it out in a torrent of benefactions, to which even Anne Valery's constant stream of good deeds appeared measured and slow. Elizabeth watched her with a strange, piercing expression—Elizabeth, who from her silent nest seemed to behold all things clearer, like a spirit sitting half-way in upper air, to whose passionless wide vision distant mazes take form and proportion. Often, there was something almost supernatural in Elizabeth and her attentive eyes.

“My dear,” she said at last, when Agatha paused for a response to her own enthusiasm, “Man proposes—God disposes! Go and talk over these things with your husband first.” Agatha went.

She met Nathanael on the staircase, going up to their own room.

“Ah! is it you? I am so glad. Come and tell me what has been done about the poor miner.”

"He is gone. I have sent him back to Cornwall."

"What, so soon? Not to starve at that Wheal—Wheal something or other—I always forget the name?"

"Do forget it. Don't let the matter trouble my little wife. Let her run down-stairs and think of something else."

He patted her hair with assumed carelessness, and was passing her by; but she stopped him.

"Ah! there it is—I am always to be a child! I am to run down-stairs and think of something else, while you go and shut yourself up to ponder over this affair. But I will not be shut out; I will go with you;—come!"

In playful force she drew him to their room, and closed the door.

"Now, sit down, and tell me the whole story. Why, how grave and pale it has made you look! But never mind; we'll find out a plan to help the poor people."



He gave some inarticulate assent, which checked her by its coldness, sank on the chair she placed, and folded his fingers tightly in one another, so that Agatha could not even strengthen herself in the bold projects she was about to communicate, by stealing her own into her husband's hand. However, she placed herself on the floor at his feet, in the attitude of a Circassian beauty ; or—she accidentally thought—not unlike a Circassian slave.

“Begin, please ! I must hear about these mines.”

“I doubt if you could understand, Agatha—at least with the few explanations I can give you.”

“Nevertheless, I'll try. Why are the poor men starving in this way ?”

“You heard but now. Because the mines were first opened on a speculation, worked carelessly—dishonestly, I fear—till the speculator's money failed, and the vein stopped. Then the miners being thrown out of employ

were reduced to great distress, as this man tells me."

"But why should he have come here after your father?"

"And," continued Nathanael, in a quick and rather inexplicable correlative, "the mines were lately sold as waste land. Anne Valery bought them."

"Why did she do that?"

"Out of charity; that she might begin some employment—flax-growing, I think—to find food for the poor people. There, the tale's ended, my Lady Inquisitive. Will you go down to my sisters?"

"Not yet. I want to talk to you a little—a very little longer. May I?"

And she drooped her head, blushing as the young will blush over the same charitable feeling which the old and hardened ostentatiously parade.

Mr. Harper gazed hopelessly around, as if longing for any means of escape and solitude. His wife saw him, and was pained.

"What—are you tired of me?"

"No, no, dear. Only, I am so busy—and have so many things to think about just now."

"Tell me some of them."

"What—tell you all my business mysteries," he returned, playfully. "Didn't you say to me once, before we were married, that you hated secrets, and never could keep one in your life?"

"It is true—quite true. I do hate them," cried Agatha. "And for all your smiling, I know you are keeping back something from me now."

"Foolish little wife!"

"Foolish—but still a wife. Look at me, and tell the truth. Is there anything in your heart which I do not know?"

"Yes, Agatha, many things."

The sudden change from jest to deep earnest startled the wife so much that she was struck dumb.

"Circumstances may happen," he conti-

nued, "and many thoughts may arise, which a husband cannot readily tell to his wife, especially a man of my queer temper and lonely ways. I always knew that the woman I married would have much to bear from me. Did I not tell her so, poor little Agatha?" And he tried to take her hand.

"You are talking in this way to soothe me, but I know well what you mean. No husband ever really thinks himself in fault, but his wife. Emma always said so."

Mr. Harper dropped the unwilling hand; but the next moment, by a strong effort, reclaimed it firmly.

"Agatha, are we beginning again to be angry with one another? Is there never to be peace between us?"

"Peace" only? Nothing closer, dearer? Yet what was it that, as Agatha looked at her husband, made her think even his "peace" better than any other's love?

"Yes," she murmured, after watching him

long in silence—"yes, there shall be peace. Whatever I am, I know how good you are. And," she added, gaily, "now let me unfold a plan of mine for proving how good we both are."

"What is it?"

"I want some money—a very great deal."

Mr. Harper turned away. "Wherefore?"

"Cannot you guess? I thought you would at once—nay, that you would be the first to propose it. I am glad I am first. Now, do guess."

"I had rather not, if it is a serious matter. If otherwise, I am hardly quite merry enough for jests to-day. Tell me."

"It is a very simple thing, though it has cost me half an hour's puzzling. I never thought so much about business in all my life. Well"—she hesitated.

"Go on, Agatha."

"I want—it must come out—I want you to take half or all of my—*our* money which is in the Funds (as I believe Major Harper

said, though I have not the least idea what Funds are)—and with it to buy a new mine, and set the poor miners all working again ; they'll like it a great deal better than flax-growing. And perhaps we could afterwards build schools and cottages, and do oceans of good. Oh ! how glad I am I was born an heiress !”

She rose, her eyes brightening ; her little figure dilated ; she had never looked so lovely—so loveable. And yet the husband sat as it were stone blind and dumb.

“ You cannot have any objection to this, I know,” Agatha went on. “ It is not like giving money openly away—making a show of charity. Nobody need know but that we do it on our own account—just to increase our riches ;” and she laughed merrily at the idea. “ Think now—how much money would it take ?”

“ I cannot tell.”

“ A great deal, probably, since you look so serious over it,” said the wife, a little vexed.

"Perhaps my plan is foolish in some things ; but I think it is right, and I am very firm—firmer than you imagine—when I feel I am in the right. Surely, living so cheaply in that tiny house—and we will live cheaper still if you choose—we shall have plenty to spare. We must do this. Say that we shall."

Her husband was silent.

Gradually the blush of enthusiasm deepened into that of annoyance—real anger. "Mr. Harper, I wait until you answer me."

As she turned away, Nathanael looked after her. Such a flood of tenderness, reverence, sorrow, passion, rarely swept over a human face.

Then he rose, paced up the room in his usual fashion, and down again ; pausing once at the window (a strange thing for him to notice just then) to let out a brown bee that, having come in for shelter from the rain, wanted to go out again with the sunshine. At last he came to Agatha's side.

"My dear wife, it grieves me to pain you by a refusal—grieves me more than you can tell ; but the plan you propose is utterly impracticable."

"Indeed !" Her colour flashed, darkened of a stormy red, and paled. She was exercising very great self-restraint.

"I will ask less," she resumed, bitterly. "I had forgotten the extreme prudence of your character. Give me just what *you* think is sufficient for charity." And her lip tried not to curl—her heart tried not to despise her husband.

Nathanael gave no answer.

"Mr. Harper, three—four times lately you have denied me what I asked. Thrice it was merely my own pleasure—which I relinquished. This time it is a matter of principle, and I will not yield. Will you—since I have made you master of my fortune—will you allow me enough out of it for my own slight gratification? That at least is but justice."



"Justice!" echoed Nathanael, his features sinking gradually into the rigidity they sometimes wore—a warning of how much the gentleness of his nature could bear.

"Hear me for one minute, Agatha. I know this is hard, very hard for you. I have prevented your living in London; I have taken a smaller house than you like; I have restricted you in acts of charity. But for all these things I have reasons."

"Will you tell me those reasons?" It was a tone, not of entreaty, but of threatening—such as a man rarely hears from a woman without all the pride within him recoiling into obstinacy.

Mr. Harper grew yet paler, though still his answer was soft—"Agatha, do not ask me. I cannot tell you."

"You dare not! You are ashamed!"

He walked away from her. When he returned, it was less the lover that spoke than the man. "I am not ashamed of anything I do, and I have clear motives for all.

I only desire my wife to have patience, and trust her husband."

"I trust my husband!" she cried, in violent passion—"When he acts outrageously, unjustly, insultingly—binds me hand and foot like a child, and then smiles and tells me 'to be patient!' When he has secrets from me—when, for all I know, his whole conduct may have been one long deceit towards me."

"Take care, Agatha." The words were said between his teeth, and then the lips closed in that strong straight line which made his face look all iron.

"I say it may have been—I have heard of such things"—and she laughed fearfully at the horrible thought a tempting devil was putting into her mind—"I have heard of young girls—poor desolate creatures, cursed with riches, and having no one to guard them—of some stranger coming and marrying them hastily, but not for love—oh, not for love!" And her laughter grew absolutely

frightful in its mockery. "How do I know but that you thus married me?"

Her wild eyes fixed themselves on her husband. She saw his face change to very ghastliness, and guilt itself could not have trembled more than the shudder which ran through his frame.

"I was right," she gasped, her passion subdued into cold horror—"you did marry me for my money!"

No answer—not a breath—only an incredulous stare. Once more Agatha's passion rose, a sea of wrath, misery, despair, that dashed her blindly on, she recked not where.

"I see it all now—all your wickedness. You never loved me, you only loved my riches. You have them now, and so you can stand there and gaze at me, as hard, as dumb as a stone. But I will make you hear—I will shriek it into your silence again—again—You married me for my money!"

Still no word. The silence she spoke of was awful. Nathanael stood upright, his

hands knotted together, the lids dropping over his eyes. He neither looked at her nor at anything. There was not the slightest expression in his face—it might have been carved in granite. When at last, almost to see if he were living man, Agatha clutched his arm, it also felt hard, immoveable, like a granite rock.

“Mr. Harper!” she cried, terror mingling with the outburst of her rage.

He merely lifted his eyes and looked at the door.—Not once—oh! never once on her!

“Ay, I will go,” she answered—“most gladly, most thankfully! I will run anywhere to escape your presence.”

She crossed the room, and tried to unfasten the door, which she had herself bolted a little while before, out of play; but her trembling fingers were useless. She was obliged to call her husband's help, and he came.

Perfectly silent, without a single glance towards her, he undid the fastening, and set

the door open for her to pass. A pang of fear, nay remorse, came over Agatha.

“Speak,” she cried—“if only one word, speak !”

His lips moved, as though framing an inarticulate “No,” and then closed again in that iron line. He still stood holding the door.

Hardly knowing what she did, Agatha sprang past the threshold, and tottered a few steps on. Then turning, she saw the door shut behind her, slowly, noiselessly, but *it was shut*. She felt as if the door of hope had been shut upon her heart.

She turned again, and fled away.

## CHAPTER VII.

It was late afternoon. The rain had ceased, and glowed into one of those soft October days, so exquisitely sunny and fair. The light glimmered through the closed Venetian blinds of "Anne's room," and danced on the carpet and about Agatha's feet as she sat, quiet at last, and tried to remember how she had come and how long she had been there. She had seen no one; nobody ever came into "Anne's room."

The dressing-bell rang—the only sound she had heard in the house for hours.

She started up, waking to the frightful certainty that all was real—that the ways of the household were going on just as

usual—that she must rouse up, no matter staggering under what burden of misery, and go through her daily part as if nothing had happened, and nothing was about to happen.

Nothing? when this day, perhaps this same hour, must decide one of two things—whether she was a wretched wife, bound for life to a man who married her solely for mercenary motives, or whether she was a wife—perhaps in this even more wretched—who had so wronged and insulted her husband that nothing ever could win his forgiveness or restore his love. His love, which, as she now dimly began to see, and shuddered in the seeing, was becoming to her the most precious thing in existence.

Never, until she sat there, quite alone, and feeling what it was to be left alone, after being so watched and cherished—never until now had she understood what the world would be to her if doomed to question her husband's honour or to outlive her husband's love.

"It must have been all a dream," she said, moving her cold fingers to and fro over her forehead. "He never could have wronged me so, or I him. He must surely explain, and I will ask his pardon for what I said in my passion—Unless, indeed, my accusation were true."

But she could not think of that possibility now—it maddened her.

"I shall meet him soon. I wonder how he will meet me. That will decide all.—Hark!"

She listened—with a vague expectation of footsteps at the door. But no one came.

"I suppose he is in his room still—our room." And all the solemn union of married life—the perpetual presence, the never parting night or day, which makes dissension in that tie more awful than in any other human bond—rushed upon her with unutterable terror.

"If he has deceived and wronged me, how shall I endure his sight? If I have outraged



him, and he will not forgive me—oh, what will become of me?"

She heard various bells ringing throughout the house, and knew that she had no time to lose. She rose up, feebly, with that aching numbed feeling which strong agitation leaves in the whole frame, and tottered to the mirror.

"I must look at myself, to see that there is nothing strange about me, in case I meet any one in the passages.—Oh, what a face!"

It was sallow, blanched, with dark shadows round the eyes, and dark lines drawn everywhere. That first storm of wild passion—that agony of remorse following, had left indelible marks. She seemed ten years older since she had last beheld herself, which was when she pulled out her long curls in the morning. She pulled them out mechanically now, trying to make of them a screen to hide the poor face that she had used to fancy they adorned. Then she flew like a frightened creature along the passages, and without

meeting any one, reached her chamber-door. It was a little way open ; she need not knock then—knock and wait trembling for the answer. Perhaps Mr. Harper was not there, and so for a few minutes she was safe from the dreaded meeting. She went in.

The room was empty, but her husband's handkerchief and riding-gloves were lying about ; he had apparently just gone downstairs. Nevertheless, though a relief, it was rather a shock to her to find the room deserted. She felt a weight in its silence, forewarning her of she knew not what ; she looked round inquiringly, as if the walls could tell her what had passed within them since she left. At last she took up her husband's gloves and laid them by with a care foreign to her general habit, and with a strange tenderness. When Mary's maid answered her summons, she could not forbear asking, carelessly, but with an inward heart-beat—"Where was Mr. Harper?"

"Mr. Locke Harper, ma'am, is sitting reading to master in the library."

He then could sit and read quietly to his father. With him, too, all household ways went on unaltered—with her only was the tempest—the despair. Her remorse ebbed down—her pride and anger rose. Light—a fierce flashing light—came to her eyes, and crimson roses to her cheeks. She dressed herself with care, and went down—though not until the last minute—to the drawing-room.

Mary met her at the door. "I was just coming to fetch you. Nathanael said you had been sitting in Anne's room."

How could he know? Had he watched her?

She answered flippantly, "'Tis very true. I have been enjoying my own company. Have I detained you, though? Is everybody here?"

Everybody was here. *He* was here. Though she never glanced that way, she saw

him, and the look he wore. To others it might seem his ordinary look, a little paler, a little more reserved, but *she* knew what it meant. She knew likewise, now that her passion had subsided, how his whole character and demeanour gave the lie to the accusation she had cast upon him. She had outraged him in the keenest point where a proud man and a man of honour can be outraged by his wife; her own hand had cleft a gulf between them which might never close.

At the thought her heart seemed dropping down—down in her bosom, like a bird whose wing is broken, it knows not how. Sick, giddy, she clung to Mary's arm for a moment.

"Nathanael, look here. What is the matter with your wife?"

"Nothing," Agatha cried. "I have only stupified myself with—with thinking. I will think no more—no more."

She tossed her head back with a fierce laugh. Her husband, who had half risen at

Mary's call, resumed his seat, making no remark.

He had never been used to show her much fondness or attention before his family, so it did not appear strange that in the few minutes before dinner he should talk to his sisters, and leave his wife to the anxious courtesies of his father. For it was now an acknowledged fact at Kingcombe Holm that the Squire was growing very fond of Agatha.

The dinner, the long, dreadful dinner, with the brilliant light glimmering in her face, and showing every expression there; with old Mr. Harper leaning forward to address her every time she relapsed into silence; with the consciousness upon her that there was no medium course, that she must talk and laugh, fast and recklessly, or else fall into tears; with the knowledge, worst of all, that there was one sitting at the bottom of the table whom she dared not look at, but whom nevertheless she perpetually saw.

Her husband had taken his usual place, and sustained it in his usual manner. There was the same brotherly chat with Mary and Eulalie, the same answers to his father, and when once, in the dinner-table courtesies, he addressed his wife, the tone was precisely as it had ever been.

Agatha could have shrieked back her answer, betraying him to all the household! This smooth outside of daily life—and with what below? It was horrible.

Yet she felt herself powerless to burst through it. His perfect silence, leaving his honour, the honour of both, in her hands, was like a chain of iron wrapped round her; however she writhed and dashed herself against it, there it was.

The Squire seemed to remain at table longer than ever to-day. He would not let his woman-kind depart. He had many toasts to give, and various old reminiscences to unfold to his daughter-in-law. She heard all in

a misty dream, and kept on vaguely smiling. At last the purgatory was ended, and they rose.

Nathanael held the door open for his wife and sisters to retire—things went on so formally even in the every-day life at Kingcombe Holm. In passing, Agatha felt as if she must burst through that icy barrier he had drawn; she *must* meet her husband's look, and compel him to meet hers. She gave him a look, proud, threatening, yet full of hidden misery. He would surely answer that.

No ! No response—not even anger. Some sorrow perhaps, but a sorrow that was stern, hopeless, undemonstrative, as was his own nature. If any wreck had been, it had already sank down into those deep waters, of which the surface appeared perpetually calm.

Agatha threw him back another look. Scorn was there and hatred—she felt as though she did really hate him at that moment. Her heart gave a leap, like a smitten

deer, and then a "laughing devil" seemed to enter therein, and dash her on—anywhere—to anything.

"Come Mary—come Eulalie, we must be very merry to-night, and my husband must join, for all his solemnity. Shake it off quick, Mr. Harper, or we'll call you a deceiver—a smooth-faced, smiling cheat."

Laughing out loud—she caught his hand, wrung it violently, and struck it aside.

"How comical you are!" said the languid Eulalie.

"But," whispered sensible Mary, "are you quite sure Nathanael liked the joke?"

"Who cares?" Yet Agatha looked back.

He had merely drawn his hand in again to the other, and his colour faintly rose. Otherwise the poor, mad, passionate girl, might as well have dashed herself against a rock. She grew still again, with a kind of fear. Her very limbs tottered as she went towards the drawing-room, and all the time



that she lay there on the sofa, Mary bustling about her, and chattering all kinds of domestic nothings, Agatha saw, as in a vision, the face so beautiful in its very sternness, so pure and righteous looking, while she felt herself so desperately, daringly wicked. All the "black, ingrained spots," which had become visible in her soul, and she knew herself to be worse than any one knew her—appeared gathering in one cloud, until she sickened at her own likeness. For beside it rose another image—and such an one! Yet there was a time when she had thought it a great sacrifice and condescension that Nathanael should be allowed to love her. Now——

No, she dared not hear the cry of her heart. She dared not do anything but hate him, as he must surely hate her. Had he stood before her that minute, she would have flung away this softness, made her flashing eyes burn up their tears, and appeared all indif-

ference. He might if he chose be as cold as ice, as proud as Lucifer ;—she would be the same. She would never once let him suspect that which this day's misery had shown her was kindling in her heart. A something, before which the pleasant little vanity of being adored, the content of an easy un-exacting liking in return, fell like straws in a flame. A something which she tried to call wrath and hate, but which was truly the avenging angel, Love.

It seemed an age before Mr. Harper came up-stairs. When he did, his father was leaning on his arm. The old gentleman looked tired, as if they had been talking much, yet seemed to regard with a lingering tenderness his son, once so little of a favourite. Why did he? Why did Nathanael soon or late win every one's attachment? And how could he show that reverent attention to his father, that cheerful kindness to his sisters, while *she* sat there, jealous of every look

and word? Each time he addressed any of these three, Agatha felt as if some unseen power were lashing her into fury.

It is a strange and terrible thing, but nevertheless true, that a good man, a kind man, a generous man, may sometimes quite unconsciously drive a woman nearly mad; make her feel as though a legion of fiends were struggling for possession of her soul, goad her weakness into acts which torture alone causes, and the after-blackness of which, presented to her real self, creates a humiliation which only drives her madder still. Men, that is, good men, who are stronger and better able to do and to bear—ought to be very gentle, very wise, in the manner they deal towards women. No short-coming or wrong, however great, from the weaker to the stronger, can merit an equal return; and according to the law, that the more delicate the mental and physical organisation, the keener is the power of suffering; so no man, be he ever so wise or tender-hearted, can

rightly estimate the depth of a woman's agony.

Agatha rose, and went away by herself into a smaller room that led out of the other, not unlike her own pet sitting-room in her maiden days—the room where she had once stood by the firelight, and Nathanael had come in and given her the first trembling, thrilling love-kiss. She stood in the same attitude now. Did she remember it? Was she, in that shadowy corner, with glimpses of light and fragments of talk pouring in from the other room, dreaming over that old time—old, though it happened scarcely three months ago—dreaming it over, with oh! what different emotions!

And when she heard a step—her ears were very quick now. Did she turn, and think to see her lover of old—so little loved? Alas! without lifting her eyes, she felt the presence was no longer that of her timid young lover, but of her husband.

Mr. Harper came in, and for the first time

since that fearful minute when she quitted him, the husband and wife were alone. Not quite so, for he had left the door wide open—purposely, she thought. There was a full vision of Mary playing chess with her father, and of Eulalie lounging on the sofa, gazing now and then with idle curiosity into the little room.

It was insulting! Why, if he came to speak healing words, did he let his whole family peer into the mysteries which ought to be sacred between the two whom marriage had made one? If only he had shut the door! If only she could do it, and then turn and cling round his neck, or even weep at his knees—for that frantic desire did strike her for a moment—anything, to win from him pardon and peace!

“Agatha, are you quite at leisure?”

To dream of answering such a tone with a flood of tears! or of clinging round a neck that lifted itself up in such a marble pride! It was impossible.

"I am quite at leisure, Mr. Harper."

At such a crisis, and between two such characters, the fate of a lifetime may depend upon the first word. The first word had been spoken, and answered.

Agatha turned to the fire again, and her husband to the shadow. Either it was fancy, or the effect of natural contact, but the one face seemed to flame, the other to darken — suddenly, hopelessly — as when the last glimmer of light fades out upon a wall.

"Can you speak with me for a few moments?"

"Certainly. Shall it be here?"

"I think so."

Agatha sat down; smoothed her dress, and held her folded hands tight upon her knees, lest he should see how they were trembling.

Mr. Harper resumed. His tone was gentle, though with a certain strangeness in it, a want of that music which runs through all deep-

toned low voices, and which in his was so very peculiar.

“ It appears to me—though nothing shall be done against your decision—that, considering all things, it would be better that our stay in my father’s house were made as short as possible.”

“ Yes—yes.” Two long pausing words, said beneath her breath.

“ Accordingly I rode to Kingcombe this afternoon, and find that we can enter the cottage on Saturday. To-day is Thursday——”

“ Is it?—Oh yes. I beg your pardon. Proceed.”

“ If it would be agreeable and convenient to you, I think we had better arrange matters so. I have already told my father it was probable we should leave on Saturday. Are you willing?”

“ Quite willing.”

“ It is settled then. On Saturday evening we go home.”

Go home! To their first home! To that new bridal nest, which, be it the poorest dwelling on earth, seems—or should seem—holy, happy, and fair! What a coming home it was! Better, she thought, that he had cast her adrift, or torn himself from her and placed the wide world between them. Rather any open separation than the mockery of such a union.

“Home!” she cried. “I will not go—I cannot. Oh, not home!”

“To a house, then—call it by what name you please. To your own house, which we will merely *say* is mine. Your comfort—” he stopped a little—“must always be the first consideration of your husband.”

“My husband!” she repeated, almost in a shriek—and the old fit of fierce laughter was coming back.

At this moment Eulalie's curious eyes were seen turning towards the little room. Nathanael moved so as to shield his wife



from them. "Hush!" he said, sorrowfully, even with a sort of pity—"hush, Agatha. We are married. Between us two there must be, under all circumstances, honour and silence."

His manner was so solemn, free from bitterness or anger, that Agatha's passion was quelled. She was awed as by the sight of some dead face, wronged grievously in life, but which now only revenges itself by the hopelessness of its mute perpetual smile. She remained staring blankly into the fire, plaiting and unplaiting the sash of her dress with heedless fingers. Eulalie might peer safely.

"There was another thing," resumed Nathanael, "which, before telling the rest of the household, I wished to say to you. I had business in Weymouth to-morrow; and—if——"

"Well? I listen."

"If—I were to ride there to-night——"

“Go.” A soft, quick word—a mere motion of the lips—and yet it was the one word of doom.

After that, without saying more, Mr. Harper walked back slowly into the drawing-room, and Agatha sat by the fireside alone.

She heard the rest talking—complaining—reasoning—heard one or two persuasive calls for “Agatha”—but she never moved. Then came the bell hastily pulled, and the old Squire’s testy summons for “Mr. Locke Harper’s horse,” and “was it a fine night, and the moon risen?” Then the drawing-room door opened and closed. No—he was not gone—not without saying adieu. He would surely pay his wife that deference. Outside the wall she heard his foot ascending the staircase, slowly, with heavy pauses between each step. She crept close to the farther door—behind the curtain—and listened.

“Agatha—where is she gone to?” said

Mary, peeping carelessly into the dark room.

“ Oh, she has followed her husband upstairs, of course. Think of all the charges and farewells—the kissing and the crying. 'Tis a wonder she did not insist on riding with him across the country, and coming back at midnight, as I suppose Nathanael will do. La! what's to become of these very devoted husbands and wives.”

Agatha crushed her hands against the wall. She felt as if she could almost have torn Eulalie's heart out—if she had a heart. While in her own bosom, leaping up in all its strength, ready at once for heroism, love, and fury—for any nobleness or any crime—was that fountain of all her sex's actions, that mainspring of all their life—the fatal woman-heart.

She waited until she heard Nathanael descend the stairs, and then, as he passed into the drawing-room to his sisters, she, by the little curtained door, passed out into the hall.

There she remained until the rest came; the sisters trooping after Nathanael, and the old Squire following likewise, to see that his son had the best and steadiest horse for a night-ride. Which ride, he took care to observe, pointedly, was a most uncourteous proceeding, and warranted by nothing, save the fact of its being performed on the especial service of Anne Valery.

"Agatha—where is Agatha hiding herself?" said Mary. "She ought not to keep her husband waiting a minute."

"Oh, no!" And the little figure, all in white, glided out from some queer corner of the hall, and stood like a ghost in the moonlight. "Good night—good night." She threw out her hand with those of the others—threw it—not gave it.

Nathanael took the hand, but did not say good night—indeed, he never spoke at all.

"Well, are you not going to embrace one another, stage-fashion? Don't let Mary and me interrupt you, pray." And the two

Miss Harpers drew back a little from the young couple.

Mr. Harper bent coldly over his wife's brow, hid under the shadow of her heavy hair.

"No, no; not that," Agatha whispered, recoiling. "Never that again."

He opened the hall-door—saying adieu to neither father nor sisters—leaped on his horse, and was gone.

"Agatha, Agatha; where are you running? He is far down the road by this time. Come in, do! Are you so very reluctant to be left for a few hours alone?"

"Oh, no! Oh, no!" And Agatha went back to the drawing-room with her sisters-in-law.

Alone! The word she had repudiated rose up like a spirit, everywhere, all over the house. Not a room but what seemed empty, strange. Fast and busily the Miss Harpers talked—yet all around was, oh! such silence. The silence that we feel in a

house when some voice and step has gone out of it, which no one misses except we, and which we miss as we should miss the daylight or the sun.

When all grew quiet, and Agatha sat in her own room—expecting nothing, for she knew he would not come—but still sitting, with her hair falling damp about her, and her eyes fixed on the mirror for company, yet half growing frightened as if it were a strange object on which she gazed—then, indeed, there was silence—then, indeed, she was *alone*.

## CHAPTER VIII.

MR. HARPER did not ride home by midnight, as his wife was well assured he would not do, though with some idle hope put into her mind by Eulalie, she sat at the window until the stars whitened in the dawn.

At noon—which seemed to come slowly, every hour a day—Mr. Dugdale appeared with a message, which by some wondrous good fortune he remembered to deliver—that Nathanael had returned from Weymouth to Kingcombe, and was waiting there. Agatha gathered with difficulty that her husband wished her to return with Mr. Dugdale.

“I will not go.”

“That’s right ! *I* wouldn’t do it upon any account,” said Eulalie, with not the kindest of laughs. “I wouldn’t be sent for like a school-girl. Let Nathanael come himself and fetch you. What a rude fellow he is !”

“Eulalie !—You forget you are speaking of your brother and my husband. I will be ready in five minutes, Mr. Dugdale.”

Duke lifted his placid but observant eyes, and smiled. “That’s good. Come along, my child.”

He had never spoken so kindly to her before. It was as if he read her trouble. Her anger faded—she was near bursting in tears. In a little while she had taken the good man’s arm—which Eulalie pointedly informed her was not the fashion at Kingcombe—and was walking with him to meet her husband.

Marmaduke talked but little ; marching on leisurely in a meditative mood, and leaving his young sister-in-law to follow his example. Once or twice she felt stealing down upon



her one of his kindly, paternal glances, and heard him saying to himself his usual winding-up of every mental difficulty :

“ Eh !—We know nothing ! Nobody knows anything. But everything always comes clear sometime.”

At the verge of the town, apparently coming to meet them, she saw Nathanael—saw him a long way off. Her heart leaped at the first vision of the tall slender figure and light hair ; but when he approached she was walking steadfastly along, her eyes lowered, and her mouth firm-set. He came up, silently gave her his arm, and she took it as silently.

Mr. Dugdale and her husband immediately began to talk, so there was no need for Agatha to do anything but walk on, trying to remember where she was, and what course of conduct she had to pursue ; trying above all to repress these alternate storms of anger and lulls of despair, and deport herself not like

a passionate child, but a reasonable woman—a woman who, after all, might have been heavily wronged.

Sometimes she essayed to consider this—to recal, as is so difficult always, the original cause of difference, the little cloud which had produced this tempest—but everything was in an inextricable maze.

Ere long, Nathanael's silence warned her that they two were alone, Mr. Dugdale having made himself absent, and being seen afar off, diving into a knot of market-politicians. Arm-in-arm the husband and wife passed on through the street. Agatha pulled her veil down, and caught more steadfast hold of her husband's arm—he was her husband, and she would maintain their honour in the world's sight. She felt how many curious eyes were watching them from windows—how many gossiping tongues would be passing comment on the looks and demeanour of Mr. and Mrs. Locke Harper.

"Shall we go over the house now, or would you like to call for my sister?"

"No — we will go at once," returned Agatha.

Steadfastly — mechanically — the young husband and wife looked over their future home, which was all but ready for habitation. It was not a mean abode now; to Mr. Wilson's furniture had been added various comforts and luxuries. Agatha asked no questions—scarcely noticed anything. She merely moved about, trying to sustain her position in the eyes of the workpeople that showed her round the house; stopping a minute to speak kindly to the servant, who was already installed there, and who, dropping a dozen respectful curtsies, explained that she was the daughter of "Master Nathanael's" nurse.

Everything seemed arranged for Mrs. Harper's comfort, as by invisible hands. She never inquired, or even thought, who

was the origin of it all. She could not believe she was in her own home—her married home;—she felt as if each minute she should wake and find herself Agatha Bowen, in the old rooms in Bedford-square, with all things else a dream.

“ Oh that it were,” she sighed within herself. “ Oh that I had never——”

She paused here—she could not wish that she had never seen Nathanael. In the human heart, at least such a heart as hers, any whirlpool of misery is better than stagnation.

They quitted the cottage and went out into the street, for country and town blended together in tiny Kingcombe. Mr. Harper closed the wicket-gate, and looked back upon the little house. There was an unquiet glitter in his eye, and his chest heaved violently for a few moments. Then, with all outward observance, he linked his wife's arm in his, and they proceeded onwards.

At the end of East-street they met Harriet Dugdale—the Dugdales seemed always wandering about Kingcombe after one another, and turning up at intervals at odd corners.

“Here you both are! I was looking for my husband. Has anybody seen Duke. Oh, where on earth is Duke gone to? He said he would be back in five minutes—which means five hours.”

“I left him at the market-place.”

“That’s an hour ago. He has been home two or three times since then. Do you think he could get on for a whole hour without wanting the Missus? Oh, there he is. Stop, and I’ll catch him.”

He was caught, and led forward prisoner by his pretty wife, who never once let him go, lest he should slide away again, and become absorbed in the mysterious electioneering groups that haunted the town.

“Now—Harrie—Missus, just wait—I’ll be back in a minute.”

"Not a minute! Anne has sent word that she wants you directly—you and Nathanael. You'll go, brother?"

"Whither?"

"To Thornhurst, to meet Mr. Trenchard and some other folk. You must start immediately."

Mr. Harper glanced towards his wife, who had dropped his arm; not pointedly, but as though release were welcome.

"What, couldn't it leave its pet again?" cried Harrie, laughing. "Bless it, nobody asks that terrible sacrifice. Do you think Anne would invite husbands without their wives? We are all to go—if you agree, Agatha."

"Oh, yes!" It was quite indifferent to her where she went, or what she did.

So they all four started in one of those inimitable conveyances called dog-carts, which seem to offer every facility for "accidental death," either by flying over the

horse's head, tumbling under the wheels, or slipping off behind.

"Where will you sit, my dear? By your husband, I suppose? Mine drives."

Agatha answered by springing up beside Mr. Dugdale, with some laughing jest. The dark fit had passed, and she was now in a mood of desperation.

They dashed on quickly; Marmaduke was a daring driver. Sometimes Agatha even thought he would overturn them in the road. Little she cared! She was in that state of excitement when the utmost peril would only have made her laugh. Passing under the three hills, and looking up at the old castle, silent and grey, the daylight shining through the fissured apertures that had been windows, she turned round and recklessly proposed to Harrie their scrambling up the green slope and rolling down again.

"E—h, my child!" said Duke Dugdale,

turning his mild, benevolent looks on the flushed face beside him. "Don't'ee try that, don't'ee, now! When people once set themselves rolling down-hill they never stop till they get to the bottom. It's always so in this world."

Agatha laughed more loudly. She wished her husband to hear how merry she was. She talked incessantly to Mr. Dugdale or Harrie, and held herself very upright, so that Nathanael, who sat behind her, might not even feel the touch of her shoulder. She, who had hitherto been so indifferent to everybody, so mild in her likings and dislikes—never till now had she felt such strange emotions. Yet each and all carried with them a fierce charm. It was like a person learning for the first time what thirst was, and drinking fire, because, in any case, he must drink. And with all her wrath there seemed a spell over heart, brain, and



senses, which never for a moment allowed her to cease thinking of her husband. Every movement he made, every word he uttered, she distinctly felt and heard.

The way grew unfamiliar; they were passing through a track of country wilder and more peculiar than any Mrs. Harper had yet seen in Dorsetshire—a road cut through furzy eminences, looking down on deep, abrupt valleys, that might have been the bed of dried-up lakes or bays; long heathery sweeps of undulating ground, with great stones lying here and there; cultivation altogether ceasing—even sheep becoming rare; and ever when they chanced to rise on higher ground, a sharp, salt, sea-wind blowing. Not a human being to be seen for miles.

“Here’s the gate. I’ll open it. Now we get into Anne Valery’s property,” said Harrie, as she leaped down and leaped

up again, mocking Nathanael's "brown study."

"What a change!" Agatha cried. "I have not seen such trees in Dorsetshire."

"They seem, indeed, to have grown on purpose for Anne. Her grandfather built Thornhurst. A queer desolate spot to choose, but it's a perfect little nest of beauty. There!"

The road opened upon a semicircular green plane, levelled among the hills, as it were on purpose, and planted round with a sheltering bulwark of trees—lime, chestnut, oak—rising higher and higher, until at the summit, where the sea-breeze caught them, grew nothing but the perpetual Dorsetshire fir. On the edge of the semicircle stood the house, this green plane before it, behind, a wide stretch of country, where the tide, running for miles inland, made strange-shaped lakes and broad rivers, spread out glistening in the afternoon sun.

"Anne must always be near the sea. I

don't think she would live even here unless she knew that just climbing those rocks would bring her in sight of the Channel. She has quite an ocean-mania."

"I'll learn it from her. I want a convenient little mania. Suppose I cure myself of my old grudge against the sea, and go from hatred into love, or from love back again into hatred—as people do."

"What a comical girl you are!"

"Very. Stay now. Wait till the horse is quiet, and I'll take a leap down—just like a person leaping into——"

"Hold, Agatha"—and she felt her arm caught by her husband. It was the first time he had touched or addressed her since they left Kingcombe. "Don't spring down—it is not safe. Stay till I lift you."

"I do not want your help."

"Excuse me, you do ; you are not used to this sort of carriage."

"Stand aside—I *will* jump down," she

cried, roused by the contest, slight as it was, but enough to show the clashing of the two wills. "Stand aside," she repeated, leaning forward with glittering eyes, giddy, and in so great confusion of mind as to be in real danger—"we will see who gives way."

"Are you in earnest?" Nathanael whispered.

"Quite. Go!"

"I would go, if it were play. But when I see my wife about to do any frantic thing to her own injury, I shall restrain her—thus."

Balancing himself on the carriage-step, he clasped the little figure in his arms—tight—strangely tight and close. Before Agatha could resist, he had lifted her safely down, and set her free.

She stood passive—astonished. What could it be in that firm will, in that sudden clasp, which made her feel—was it anger? No, not anger, though her cheeks glowed

and her breast heaved. Why was it, that as Nathanael walked onward towards the house, his wife looked after him with such a mingling of attraction and repulsion? What could it be, this strange power which gave him the pre-eminence over her—which taught her, without her knowing it, the mystery that causes man to rule and woman to obey? Very thoughtful—even unmoved by Harrie's loud laughter at the "excellent joke"—Mrs. Harper suffered herself to be led on by her sister-in-law.

"Nonsense, child, don't look so serious. Men will have their way—especially husbands. Mine gets obeyed as little as any one; but now and then, when it comes to the point"—here Harrie looked astonishingly grave, for her—"I'm obliged to give in to Pa; and somehow Pa's always right, bless him!"

How every word of one happy wife went like a dagger into the other wife's heart!

But there was no shield. Here they were in Anne Valery's house, obliged to appear as cheerful guests, especially the newest guest, the bride. Agatha tried, and tried successfully, to play her part :—misery makes such capital hypocrites !

“ Isn't this a large house for a single woman ?” said Mrs. Dugdale, as the two ladies passed up-stairs. “ Yet Anne constantly manages to fill it, especially in summer-time. The dozens of sick friends she has staying here to be cured by sea-breezes ! the scores of young people that come and make love in those green alleys down the garden ! But then in the lulls of company the house is dull and silent—as now.”

It was very silent, though not with the desolation which often broods over a large house thinly inhabited. The room—Anne's bedroom—lay westward, and a good deal of sunshine was still glinting in. A few late bees were buzzing about the open window,

cheated perhaps by the feathery seeds of the clematis, which had long ceased flowering. There was no other sound. But many fine prints, a few painted portraits, and several white-gleaming statuettes, seemed as the sunlight struck them to burst the silence with mute speech.

"Oh, you are looking at Anne's 'odds and ends,' as I call them. Rather a contrast, her walls and ours. I don't see the use of prints and plaster images—always in the way where there are children. But Anne is so dreadfully fond of pretty things. She says they're company. No wonder! A solitary old maid must find herself very dull at times."

"Must she?—then she is the more glad to see her visitors."—A pleasant voice, a silken-rustling step, which in Agatha's fancy seemed always to enter like daylight into a dusky room—and Miss Valery came to welcome her guests.

She addressed Mrs. Harper first, and then Harrie, who looked confused for the moment. But it was not a trifle that could upset the equanimity of the honest-speaking Harrie Dugdale.

“Bless us, Anne, how softly you walk! ‘Listeners,’ &c.—You know the saying! But you might listen at every door in Dorsetshire, and never hear worse of yourself than I said just now.”

“Thank you. When I want a good character I shall be sure to come to Harriet Dugdale.—And now, what is the news with the little wife? whom I have yet to bid welcome to Thornhurst. Welcome, Mrs. Locke Harper.” Anne said the name, as she often did, with a peculiar under tone of hesitation and tenderness; then, according to her frequent habit, she put her hand on her favourite’s shoulder, and began to play with the brown curls. “Have you been quite well and happy since I saw you?”



The question, so simple, so full of kindness, pierced Agatha's soul. Alas! how much had happened since she sat on the stone seat at C—— Castle, and looked over the view with Anne Valery! How little did Anne or any one know that she was wretched—maddened—hating herself and the whole world—believing in nothing good, nothing holy—not even in her who spoke. The words, the smile, appeared the mocking hypocrisy of one who had lured her on to marry, and must ere long know of that hasty marriage the miserable result. This thought steeled her heart even against Anne Valery.

She burst into a sharp laugh. "Well! Happy! Cannot you see? You are the best person to answer your own question." And she moved away out of the room.

Anne looked after her, thoughtfully, rather sadly. Perhaps she was used to have her pets glide from her, dancing out indifferently

into the merry world. She made no attempt to follow Agatha, but led the way downstairs into the drawing-room.

“Mr. Trenchard, come and let me introduce you to Mrs. Locke Harper.”

As Miss Valery said this, an elderly gentleman, dapper, dandy, and small, escaped from under the hands of Duke Dugdale—those big earnest hands that were laid upon him in all the apostleship of sincere argument—and came, nothing loth, as his eager bow showed, to do the polite to the young bride who had been lately brought to the county. For Mr. Trenchard, besides the wondrously sweetening power of his candidateship, came of a very ancient name in Dorsetshire. He was evidently a beau too—one of those harmless general adorers whom the influence of a graceful woman touches even unto old age.

Agatha saw in his first look that he admired her, and she was in that proud

desperate mood when a girl is ready to catch hold of the attentions or conversation of any one—even an elderly gentleman. She was very gracious to Mr. Trenchard—nay, altogether bewitching—though for the first ten minutes she herself saw and heard nothing save a thing in black with white hair, talking to her of the beauties of Dorsetshire. More distinctly than aught he said, she heard what was passing in the group at the other end of the room—especially her husband's voice, so quiet and deep, always a tone deeper than any other voices, falling through all the rest like a note of music. And she soon found out that Anne was listening also—to Nathanael, of course. She always did.

Mr. Trenchard followed the direction of the two ladies' eyes, and ingeniously took up the text.

“I assure you, Mrs. Harper, it is a pleasure to all the neighbourhood that your

husband has come back from America. I remember him quite a child, and his uncle a young man. And really, how like he is, in both feature and voice, to what his uncle used to be at that time. As he stands there talking, I could almost fancy it was Mr. Locke Harper."

"Mr. Locke Harper," repeated Agatha. "Was that the name Uncle Brian went by?"

"Yes, save with those privileged people who called him Brian. But they were few. He had not the fortune or misfortune of possessing a thousand and one intimate friends. Yet every one respected him, and remembers him still. It will be a real satisfaction to have in the county a second Mr. Locke Harper.—Dear me, how like he is! Don't you see it, Miss Valery?"

"There is a general likeness running through all the Harper family."

"Except the eldest son, though even to him I can trace some resemblance here"

—and he bowed to Mrs. Dugdale. “And this reminds me that I knew beforehand I should probably have the pleasure of meeting Mrs. Harper in Dorsetshire. Only two days ago I saw at Paris Major Frederick Harper.”

“Is Major Harper at Paris?” cried Agatha, caught by the name, which had so soon passed out of the daily interests of her life, so that its sound was already quite strange. It reached her now like a comforting breath of old times—a something to catch hold of in the wide, dreary maze around her. Her former guardian seemed to rise up before her; with all his cheery, good-natured ways; his compassion when she had been newly made an orphan; his kindness of manner that remained—ay, to the very last.

In a rush of many feelings that softened her voice to positive tenderness, she cried: “Oh, do tell me all about Major Harper?”

And this time she did not notice that, in

the political discussion going forward, it was Mr. Dugdale who spoke, his brother-in-law having ceased the argument and become silent.

“Madam,” returned the candidate, with a smile—perhaps a little too meaning a smile—  
“I will, with pleasure, tell you everything. I guessed from his anxious questions concerning you, and whether I had met you in Dorsetshire, that before he was your brother-in-law Major Harper had the happiness of being an intimate friend of yours.”

“He was my guardian.”

“That fact he did not inform me of. Indeed, we had little time for conversation. We merely dined together, and parted almost immediately. He seemed in the midst of a whirl of pleasant engagements, as Major Harper invariably is. Charming, agreeable man! An immense favourite with all ladies.”

Agatha answered “Yes” rather coldly. Her attention was wandering; she had missed .

the sound of her husband's voice altogether. But the next moment she heard him behind her.

“Mr. Trenchard?”

“Well, my dear sir! Are you also come to ask questions about your brother, whom, as I have been telling Mrs. Harper, I had the pleasure to meet in Paris?”

“So I have just heard you say. Where and how was he living?”

Agatha thought this a strange question for Nathanael to put to a third party concerning his own brother. She was glad to hear Miss Valery observe, with genuine tact, that Major Harper was always careless in the matter of giving addresses.

“He was living—let me see—at 102, Rue ———, one of the handsomest and pleasantest streets in Paris. I remember, he said he was obliged to take this *appartement* for three months, after which he was going to act the hermit and economise Very un-

likely that, I should think, for a man of Major Harper's social habits."

"Very," Agatha said, being looked to for a response. She was much surprised to learn this of her brother-in-law; still more did she wonder at the rigid silence with which her husband heard the same.

"I think, Mrs. Harper, we may safely say that his determination will not last. A mere fit of misanthropy after rather too much gaiety. In such a pleasant fellow as Frederick Harper we must excuse a few broken resolutions."

"We ought," said Anne Valery, with that rare gentleness which makes men listen to a woman even when she "preaches." "It is a very hard trial for any one to be thrown into the world with so many gifts as Major Harper. A man whom all men like, and not a few women are prone to love, goes through an ordeal so fierce, that if he withstand it he is one of the greatest heroes



on God's earth. If he fall"—and Anne lowered her voice so that Agatha could scarcely hear, though she felt sure Nathanael did—"if he fall, we ought, through all the wrong, clearly to discern the temptation."

It was a new doctrine, the last Agatha would have expected to hear on the lips of such a sternly good woman as she had painted Miss Valery. She said so, adding, with her usual plainness, "I thought, somehow, that you did not like Major Harper?"

"Nay, we were all young together," Anne answered, with a thoughtful smile. "But hush, my dear, your husband is speaking."

He was saying, with quite an altered expression, something about "my brother Frederick." But after that mention Major Harper's name died out of the conversation, as out of Agatha's memory. Alas, not the unfrequent fate of the Major Harpers of society—meteors, never thought of but while

they are shining, and forgotten as soon as they have burnt themselves out.

By this time the two or three stray visitors—gentleman-farmers, Anne's tenants, as Mrs. Dugdale whispered—had disappeared, and Mr. Trenchard was the sole stranger left in the drawing-room. Miss Valery did the honours of her house with a remarkably simple grace.

"I give no state dinner parties," she said, smiling, to Mr. Trenchard. "It is a whim of mine that I never could see the use of friends meeting together merely to eat and drink, or of offering them more and richer fare than is customary or necessary. But if you will stay and dine with me, and with these my own people, country fashion, even though you have been a ten years' resident in London——"

"But have never forgotten Dorset, and good Dorset ways," said the old gentleman, as he bowed over the hostess's hand. Then, obey-

ing Anne's signal, he offered his arm to Mrs. Harper to lead her in to dinner ;—the innocent daylight dinner, with real China-roses looking in at the window, and an energetic autumn-robin singing his good-night before the sun went down.

Agatha could have been happy, merry—she was still so young, and the weight on her heart was the first that ever had fallen there. At intervals she struggled to forget it—almost succeeded ; and then the first glimpse of her husband's face, the first tone of his voice, brought the burden back again. Her spirits grew wilder than ever, lest any one should guess she was so very, very miserable.

After dinner, dreading Anne's eyes, she rushed off into the garden with Harrie Dugdale ; tossing back her hair, and inhaling by gasps the cold evening wind, that it might bring calm and clearness to her brain. Even yet she felt as though she were dreaming.

Returning, she found lights in the drawing-room. Mr. Trenchard, in a patient attitude, was listening to Marmaduke Dugdale; some distance off Nathanael sat talking to Miss Valery. Anne was leaning back in an arm-chair: the lamp shining full on her face showed how very pale and worn it was. Her voice, too, sounded feeble, as Agatha caught the words:

“In two months, you think? That is a long time.”

“It cannot be sooner, Marmaduke says. I met him on board the ship at Weymouth; when he told me of this innocent little scheme he was transacting.”

“But you will not tell——”

“Uncle Brian? No, of course not. Yet I think it would do Uncle Brian good to know how dearly Marmaduke and all his friends here care for him. Yet he might not believe it—I think he never did.”

Anne was silent.

“ He used to say,” continued Nathanael, who was sitting where he could not see his wife, and for once heard not her soft step over the carpet—“ Uncle Brian used to say, that it was wisest neither to love nor need love. I think different. It is a cruel, hardening, embittering thing for a man to feel that no one loves him.”

— “ Love—love! Have you two sage ones been discussing that folly? Now, may I have the honour to hear?”

“ If Anne will talk; I have done my speaking,” said Mr. Harper, as he gave Agatha his chair, and slowly—not so as to be noticeable—moved away to the other circle.

Thus, ever thus, he went from her, escaping the chance of either being wounded or healed. Agatha was nearly wild. With all her might she flung herself into conversation with Mr. Trenchard, and tried to conjugate that verb—hitherto a mystery to

her innocent mind—to *flirt*. She wished to make herself beautifully hateful—bewitchingly foul; or rather she did not care what she made herself, if she only made *him*—who had now in her thoughts sank to the namelessness which proves that one name is fast filling up the whole world—made him stir from that mountain height of impassive calm—melted him into repentance—shook him into frenzied jealousy. Anything—anything—so that he no longer should stand before her like a serene Alp, which nothing human could disturb, and which—ah, in all her madness, she saw that but too clearly!—which had always such a heavenly light shining on its forehead—a purity “God-given,” like his name.

His name, which she had once so disliked, but which now caught a strange beauty. Lately, she had looked out its meaning in a list of Bible names; and many a time, the night before, she had said it to herself, crying

it out into the dark, until its soft Hebrew vowels grew musical, and its holy Hebrew meaning grew divine. "Nathanael—Nathanael—*God-given*." Might he not indeed be a husband given unto her of God—to lead her in the right way, and make a true noble woman of her? such as a woman is always made by the love of, and the loving of, a noble man.

But these were sacred night-time thoughts, which vanished in the daylight, or only came in snatches and rifts, careering through the blackness that surrounded her.

And still she talked to the fortunate Mr. Trenchard; made herself more agreeable than she had ever believed possible. The elderly beau was fascinated, and even Mr. Dugdale turned his innocent gaze from election-papers, looking at his fair sister-in-law with genuine admiration—now and then nodding to Harrie, as if to see what she thought of this new light that had shot

across their country hemisphere. At which Mrs. Dugdale once or twice pretended to be mightily jealous, until her husband, with his inconceivable sweet smile, his way of patting her knees with his big gentle hand, and the utterly inexpressible tone of his "Nay, now, Missus"—made matters quite straight, and plunged back into his politics.

All this while Anne Valery sat in her arm-chair—speaking little, looking from one to the other of her guests with a wandering thoughtful eye, that, for once, noticed little the things around her, because her mental vision was afar off.—Whither?

And Marmaduke went on with his benevolent schemes for improving Dorsetshire and the world; and his Harrie had her dreams too—possibly about the advantage an M.P.'s interest might prove in future days to "the children;" and the young couple, in all the whirl of their misery, still clung to hope and youth and life, so little of which way they



had trod, and so much of which lay before them. No one thought of her who sat apart, looking smilingly on them all, but to whom they and the things surrounding them were day by day growing more dim—who was fading, fading, even while she smiled.

## CHAPTER IX.

WHEN, late at night, the party reached Kingcombe, it was resolved that the Harpers should remain there until morning. Agatha, worn out with bodily fatigue and the great tension of her mind during so many hours, laid her head down on her pillow, closed her aching eyes, and never opened them till near upon broad noon. Then she found breakfast was long over in the early house of the Dugdales, and that Nathanael had been gone out some hours.

“He would not let me come and wake you—he said you slept so heavily and looked so tired. Certainly, he is the very kindest

husband ! Who ever would have believed that stiff, cold, disagreeable Nathanael, who came home from America some months ago, puzzling us all, would have turned out so well. It is your ladyship's doing, I suppose."

So ran on Mrs. Dugdale, nor noticed how beneath her words her sister-in-law writhed, as though they had been sharp swords. Harrie was not a penetrating woman ; Agatha had already discerned that, and thought, with a self-contemning, bitter smile, that it was well they were coming to live at Kingcombe, and that Mrs. Dugdale would be a very safe and amusing companion.

" Now, what is to be done to-day ?" said she, as she ate the breakfast which Harrie brought her, and looked round the strange room, which made her feel more bewildered than ever. So many phases, so many lives did she seem to have passed through since she was married.

" The first thing to be done, my dear, is to

take you back to Kingcombe Holm, to do respectful to your papa-in-law. Very punctilious is the Squire. If Nathanael had not ridden over there at some unearthly hour this morning, he never would have forgiven your not returning at night—the last night too, for I see your husband is determined to be settled at the cottage this evening.”

“Ah, that is well.” Agatha breathed more freely. She was so glad to hide herself under any roof that was her own. And perhaps a vague thought crept up, that some time—not for days yet, but when she could bend her pride to soften him—when they were living quite alone together, during the quiet walks, the long still evenings, just like honeymoon-season—all might be gradually explained, nay, healed, between her and her husband. She was on the whole not sorry to go “home.”

“I see you two are quite agreed,” laughed

Harrie. "Marvellous union, Mrs. Locke Harper. You'll be really a pattern couple soon, and throw Duke and me cruelly in the shade. Now, dress like lightning, and I'll drive you and the children over to grand-papa's. Most likely we'll meet Pa and Nathanael somewhere about the town."

But, with the general vagueness of the Dugdale habits, that meeting did not arrive, nor was Mr. Harper anywhere to be seen.

"I dare say he is at the cottage, where I was bid not to take you upon any account. Charming little mysteries, I suppose, attendant on bringing home the bride. Very nice. Heigh-ho! I remember how happy I was when my poor dear Duke brought me home for the first time!"

"Where was that?" They were dashing over the moors, Agatha sitting rather silent, and Harrie's tongue galloping as fast as Duncce, her steed. Little Brian was perched on his

mother's knee, holding the reins—a baby Phaeton, though with small danger of setting the world on fire—at least just yet.

“Where was it, my dear? Why, to the same old house we live in, empty and gloomy then, though it's full enough now. And I had been married—(hold your tongues, Fred and Gus! you can't have the whip, simpletons!)—married only three weeks, and it was queer coming back to my native place; and my father was rather cross that I had married Duke at all, and—I was foolish enough to cry.”

Here Harrie laughed, and gave Dunce a lash that quite discomposed his pony faculties; and made Brian scream with delight.

“And what did your husband say?”

“Say? Nothing! He never speaks when he's vexed or hurt; only, a little while afterwards, he came beside me, and said something about my being such a young girl, so gay-hearted and pretty—(bah!—though I was

pretty then)—too young, he said, to marry such an elderly man, &c., &c., &c."

"And what did *you* say?"

"Likewise nothing. I just jumped on his knee, and took him round the neck, and—— But that isn't of the slightest consequence to anybody. Tuts! On with you, Dunce!" And Harrie leaned forward, her eyelashes glittering wet in spite of her fun.

"I know I don't deserve him," she continued. "I never did. Nobody could. There are a lot of bad men in the world, but when a man is really good, there's hardly a woman alive that is good enough for him. And I'm not half good enough for Duke—but—I love him! That's all. Bless thee, Brian! thee is Pa's own boy!"

And Harrie kissed the little fellow passionately, with something more even than a mother's love.—Agatha could have lifted up her arms and shrieked with misery.

It was a strange long day at Kingcombe Holm; many things to be arranged, many questions to be parried, many prying eyes to be avoided. But the general conclusion seemed to be that this sudden movement was a mysterious whim of Nathanael—and Nathanael was supposed by one-half of his family to be mightily prone to mysteries and whims.

At length, when the day was nigh spent, and Agatha had dressed for the last of those formal dinners to which she had never been able quite to reconcile herself, she took refuge in Elizabeth's room. Thither she had of late absented herself; there was something so formidable in the keenness of Elizabeth's silent eyes. Hesitating before the door, she remembered when she had last quitted it. It required all her bravery to cross the threshold once more.

"Come in. I hear your foot, Agatha." There was no stepping back now.

The same atmosphere of peace and sanc-



tity pervading the pretty room ; the same lights dancing through the painted window on the silk coverlet ; the same face, which had all the colourless reality of death without any of its ghastliness—a smiling repose, such as is seen only at the beginning and end of life's tumult—in the cradle and in the coffin. Its effect upon Agatha was instantaneous. The trembling passed from her limbs ; she stepped lightly, as one does in entering a holy place.

“ Elizabeth ! Elizabeth ! ” It seemed a beautiful name, a saint's name, and as such came quite naturally, though she had rarely before been so familiar with any one of her new sisters. She kneeled down and kissed Elizabeth.

“ That is right. You are good to come. And where have you been, my little sister ? I have not seen you for three days.”

“ Is it so long ? ”

“ Yes—though it may seem longer to me here. You remember, you came and told me a

long story about a Cornish miner. How did the tale end? What, no answer?"

None. She tried to hide herself—crush herself into the very floor where she sat, out of reach of Elizabeth's eyes.

"Ah, well, dear! I shall not ask."

"Perhaps my husband will tell you some day. Talk to me of something else, Elizabeth. And oh! however I may look and speak, don't notice me. Let me feel that I need not make pretences with you."

"You need not. Nothing that happens here goes beyond these four walls. Everybody tells everything to me."

Elizabeth might well say this. There was that un-human aspect about her which made people fearless and free in their confidence; it did not seem like talking to a mortal woman, mixed up continually in the affairs of life, but to one removed to a different sphere, where there was no chance of betrayal. Her room

was a safe confessional, and she was a sort of general conscience in the house.

“Everybody tells you everything,” repeated Agatha. “Does my husband?”

“Not yet; at least not in words.”

“Then I will not. Only let me come here, and——” She covered her face, and for a few moments wept fully and freely, as one weeps before one’s own heart and before God. Then she dried her eyes, and the storm was over.

Elizabeth only said, “Poor child—poor child. Wait!” But the one word struck like a sun-ray through darkness. No one ever “waited” but had some hopeful ending to wait for.

“Now,” said Agatha, overcoming her weakness—“now let us talk. What have you been doing all day?”

“Little else than read this, and think over it. You know Frederick’s hand, I see? He does not usually write such long letters,

even to me. All is not right with him, I fear."

"Indeed!"—and Agatha met unsuspectingly the keen look of Elizabeth: "Yet he is well and in the midst of gaieties; Mr. Trenchard said so yesterday. They met in Paris."

"Did they?" Elizabeth lay musing for a good while; then suddenly said, observing her young sister, "Agatha, you are listening? There's some one at the door?"

It was Nathanael. Any one might have known that by the quick flush that swept over his wife's features. But when this passed she was again composed—not at all like the young creature who had wept by Elizabeth's couch. She merely acknowledged her husband's presence, and leaving her place vacant for him, took up a book.

He said, "I did not know my wife was here. Were you and she talking? Shall I leave you?"

Elizabeth smiled. "Then you must take your wife also, for I will not be the sundering of married people. But nonsense! Sit down both of you. We were speaking about Frederick. Has he written to you?"

"No."

"In this letter"—Nathanael's eyes fell on it and froze there—"he gives me no address. Agatha says he is living in Paris. Do you remember where?"

"I do not."

"Perhaps your wife does."

Agatha had a useful memory for such things. She repeated the address given by Mr. Trenchard, exactly.

"Good child! When I write I shall tell Frederick how you remembered him. But he has been equally mindful of you. He asks many questions, and seems very anxious about you."

"Does he? He is very kind," said Agatha,

somewhat moved. She felt all kindness deeply now.

"He is kind," Miss Harper continued, thoughtfully. "When he was a boy, there never was a softer heart. Poor Frederick!" And the name was uttered with a fondness that Agatha had never noticed in any other of Major Harper's family towards him. It led her to look sympathisingly towards Elizabeth.

"Are you uneasy about him? Oh! I do hope nothing is wrong with poor Major Harper." And she almost forgot her own feelings in thinking how unbrotherly it was of Nathanael to sit there like a stone, saying nothing. Elizabeth also seemed hurt; the elder brother was clearly her favourite—clung to as sisters cling, through good report and evil. She looked gratefully at Agatha.

"Thank you. You are a warm-hearted girl. But you ought to keep a warm heart for Frederick. You do not know how tenderly he always speaks of you."

Agatha coloured, she hardly knew why, except because she saw her husband start and look at her—one of those wild, quick lightning looks that only last a moment. Under it she blushed still deeper—to very scarlet.

Mr. Harper stood up. “I think, Elizabeth, we must go now. Agatha shall come to you again in a day or two—and you and she can then talk over both your sisterly loves for Frederick.”

He spoke lightly, but Agatha heard a jarring tone—she was growing so familiar with his every tone now. Why did he thus speak, thus look, whenever she uttered or listened to his brother's name? Could it be possible that Emma had told him—No, she threw that thought from her in scorn—the scorn with which she had once met the insinuation that she had been “in love” with Major Harper. Emma could not have been so foolish, so wicked, or, if she had, any

manly honour, any honest pride, would have made Nathanael speak of it before their marriage. Since, she felt certain that Mr. Harper had not interchanged a single word alone with Mrs. Thornycroft.

In disgust and shame that her vanity—oh! not vanity, but a feeling that, holy as it was, her proud heart still denied—had led her to form the suspicion, Agatha cast it from her. She, who had no secrets, no jealousies, felt it to be impossible that Nathanael should bury within his breast that foul thing—a secret jealousy of his brother.

Especially now, when it seemed as if his love itself were dying or dead—when, on quitting Elizabeth's room, he walked with her, silent, or making smooth brief speeches, as he would to any other lady—any lady he had met for the first time, and was handing courteously down to dinner. Her heart boiled within her! Was she to pour it out before him in complaint—repentance? Was



she to accuse him of jealousy, and be met with a calm contemptuous smile?—to betray the growing passion of her heart, in order to light up the few stray embers that might yet be lingering feebly in his? Never! She walked on haughtily, carelessly, dumb.

The evening slid on, hardly noticed by her. Night came; when, after many ceremonious family adieux, which she responded to without ever hearing—after one frantic rush along the dim passages to Elizabeth's door, where she drew back and left the tearful good-by unspoken, for *he* was standing there—after all this the Squire put her in the family coach, with Mrs. Dugdale at her side and Nathanael opposite. Bidding her farewell, the old man gave, with less stateliness than tenderness, his fatherly blessing upon her and her new home. They reached it. Again she laid her head upon a strange pillow in a strange room, and slept, as she always did when very wretched, the heavy, stupifying

sleep which lasts from night till morning—deadening all care, but making the waking like that of one waking in a tomb.

Agatha woke with the sunshine full in her eyes, and the early church-bells ringing.

“Oh, where am I? What day is this? Where is my husband?”

The new maid, Nathanael's foster-sister, was standing by, smiling all respectful civilities, informing her in broad Dorset that it was Sunday, time for “missus” to get up, and that “master” was walking in the garden.

They “mistress” and “master,” head and guide of their own household!—they, two young creatures, who so little time ago had been a youth and a girl, each floating adrift on life, without duties or ties. It had seemed very strange, very solemn, under any circumstances, but now——

“Oh, God help me, poor helpless child that I am! Oh, what shall I do?”

Such was the inward sob of Agatha's heart. She almost wished that she could have turned her face again on the pillow, and slept there safely for eternity.

But the matin church-bells ceased—it was nine o'clock. She must rise, and appear below for the first time as mistress in her own house. Also, she remembered faintly something which Mrs. Dugdale had said about the custom at Kingcombe—an irrefrangible law of country etiquette—of a bride's going to church for the first time, ceremoniously, in bridal dress. And no sooner had she descended—wrapped in the first morning-frock she could lay her hands upon, than Harrie entered.

“So—I am your first visitor you see. Many welcomes to your new home! And may it prove as happy, as merry—and some day, as full—as ours. Bless you, my dear little sister!”

She pressed Agatha in her arms with more

feeling than Harrie usually showed. But, for Agatha's salvation, it was only momentary.

"Come, no sentiment! Call in Nathanael, and eat your breakfast quickly, you atrociously lazy folks! Don't you know you have only half an hour, and you must go to church, or all Kingcombe would be talking."

"I meant to go—I shall be ready in two minutes."

"My patience! ready—in such a gown! Come here, Nathanael. Are you aware it's indispensable for your wife to appear at church in wedding costume, just as she did on that blissful day, when——"

"Hush! I'll do anything you like, only hush!" whispered Agatha. Harrie laughed, and said something about "sparing her blushes." There were none to spare—she was as pale as death. What, appear before her husband, dressed as on the morning when if not altogether a happy bride, she at least had the hope of making her bride-

groom happy, and the comfort of believing that he loved her and would love her always! The mere thought of this sent a coldness through all her frame.

Nathanael said, "You told me this before, Harriet. It is an idle custom; but neither my wife nor myself would wish to go against the world, or the ways of our own people. Arrange it, as Agatha says, according as you like."

He had then heard her whisper—he had seen her paleness. How had he interpreted both?

The church-bells began to ring again, and Harrie prepared to vanish, though not until she had dressed Agatha, scanned her from top to toe, vowed the bonnet did not become her a bit, and that she looked as white as if she were again about to go through the formidable marriage-service.

"A sad pity!—because to-day you'll be looked at a great deal more than the clergy-

man. We are a terribly inquisitive town; and weddings are scarce at Kingcombe.—Take your wife, Nathanael. There you go—a very handsome, interesting young couple. Nay, don't cheat the townsfolk by taking the garden way."

"Do, pray?" entreated Agatha of her husband. "Don't let the people see us."

"You foolish child!" cried Harrie, as she made herself invisible through the front-door, throwing back her last words as an unconscious parting sting. "Folks will think you are ashamed of your husband."

Agatha took no notice, nor did Nathanael. Silently they walked to church, the garden way, which led them out opposite the eastern door. Entering with his wife on his arm, his bare head erect, though the eyes were lowered, his whole face still and steadfast, but looking much older since his marriage—Mr. Harper was a man of whom no one need be ashamed. His wife glanced

at him, and, in spite of all her sorrow, walked proudly up the aisle—prouder far than on her wedding-day. She never thought of herself or of the people looking at her. And—Heaven forgive her, poor child!—for the moment she never thought of Whose temple she was entering, until the clergyman's serious voice arose, proclaiming those "sacrifices" which are "a broken spirit." Then her spirit sank down broken within her, and under her thick white veil, and upon her white velvet bridal Prayer-book, fell tears, many and bitter. The poor charity-girl that stared at her from the gallery would not that day have envied the bride.

Service over, out of the church they went as they had come, arm-in-arm; the congregation holding back; all watching, but from some mysterious etiquette which must be left to the Kingcombe-ites to elucidate, no one venturing to speak to Mr. and Mrs.

Locke Harper. The Squire's household did not attend this church, nor the Dugdales either; so that the young people walked home without speaking to a soul, and scarcely to each other. They were both very grave. A word, perhaps, from either would have unlocked a heart-flood; but the word was not spoken. They met at the gate of the cottage Mrs. Dugdale and her boys. Soon all the solemn influences of the temple passed away. They were in the world once more—the hard, bitter, erring world.

“We are come in to see Auntie Agatha and Uncle Nathanael,” said Harrie, as the children stood rather awe-struck by Mrs. Harper's dazzling appearance. “And we are going to take both back with us for dinner, as you promised. Early country dinner, my dear, which can't by any means be eaten in those fine clothes.”



"I will take them off." And her foot was on the stairs.

"Stay; don't you see your husband looking at you. Let me look too—we shall never see you dressed as a bride again."

Agatha paused, but Mr. Harper had already turned away. His gaze—would she had seen it! but she did not—was ended.

She ran up-stairs, she looked in the glass once more at the vision which, from the age of childhood, almost every girl beholds herself in fancy—the dazzling white silk, orange-flowers, and lace, trappings of a day, never to be again indued. Then she tore them off, wildly—desperately; wishing one minute that she could bury them in the earth out of her sight, and again wrapping them up tenderly, as we wrap up clothes that are now nothing but empty garments, from which the form that filled them has vanished evermore.

Afterwards she dressed herself in matronly garb, and came down with matronly aspect to Harrie and the little boys.

A mid-day country dinner, eaten in peace and quietness, where people keep Sunday in Christian fashion—at least externally—where no visitors come in, and no gay evening reunions put an unholy close to the holy day; when the father of the family gathers his children round him in the long, sleepy afternoons, or takes a walk with them in the summer-twilight while all the neighbours are safe in church; after which, as a great treat, the elder ones sit up to supper, and the little ones are put to bed by mamma's own hands; then pleasant weariness, perhaps some brief evening prayer, sincere without cant—the household separates—the house darkens—and the day of rest ends.

This was the way they kept Sunday at the Dugdales'. It was something new to Agatha, and she liked it much. She threw

herself into the domestic ways as if she had been used to them all her life, and especially made herself popular with the father and the little ones. Marmaduke looked benevolently upon his sister-in-law, seemed quite to forget she was "a young lady," and even was heard to call her "my child" four times,—at which she was very pleased and proud. Over and over again, with that wild thirst to be happy that the young have, she tried to forget the weight on her life, and plunge into a temporary gaiety. Sometimes she even caught herself laughing outright, as she played with the children; for no one can be miserable always, especially at nineteen. But whenever she looked up, or was silent, or paused to think, the image of her husband came like a cloud between her and her youth. No—she never could be really happy.

Nathanael was all day very quiet and abstracted. He did not romp with his

little nephews, and only smiled when Harrie teased him for this unusual omission of avuncular privilege. Once, Agatha saw him sitting with the youngest little girl fast asleep against his shoulder, he looking over her baby-curls with a pensive, troubled eye, an eye which seemed gazing into the future to find there—nothing! A strange thrill quivered through Agatha's heart to see him so sitting with that child.

After tea Mrs. Dugdale proposed turning out of doors all the masculine half of the family, except the infantile Brian, before whom loomed the terrific prospect of bed. So off they started, Gus being seen to snatch frantically at Pa's hand, and Fred, sublime in his first jacket, walking alongside with an air and grace worthy of the uncle whose name he bore.

"There they go," cried Mrs. Dugdale, looking fondly after them. "Not bad-looking lads either, considering that Pa isn't exactly a

beauty. But pshaw! what does that signify? I think my Duke's the very nicest face I know. Don't you, Agatha?"

Agatha warmly acquiesced. She had entirely got over the first impression of Duke's plainness. And moreover she was learning day by day that mysterious secret which individualises one face out of all the world, and makes its very deficiencies more lovely than any other features' charm. She could fully sympathise with Harrie's harmless weakness, and agreed—looking at Brian, who in fact strongly resembled his father angelicised into childhood, keeping the same beautiful expression, which needed no change—that if Mr. Dugdale's sons grew up like him in all points the world would be none the worse, but a great deal the better.

Thus talking—which little Brian seemed actually to understand, for he stood at her knee gazing up with miraculously merry eyes—Agatha watched her sister-in-law's

Sunday duty, religiously performed, of putting the younger two to bed, while the nurses went to church, or took walks with their sweethearts. For, as Harrie sagely observed, “ ‘ the maidens,’ as we call them in Dorsetshire, ‘ the maidens’ will fall in love as well as we.”

So chattering merrily—while she dashed water over Miss Baby’s white, round limbs, and let Brian caper wildly about the nursery, clad in all sorts of half-costumes, or no costume at all—Mrs. Dugdale initiated Agatha into various arcana belonging to motherhood and mistress-of-a-family-hood. The other listened eagerly, so eagerly that she could have laughed at herself, remembering what she was six months before. To think that to-morrow she must begin her house-keeping—she, who knew no more of such things than a child! She snatched at all sorts of knowledge, talked over butchers,

and bakers, and house-expenses, and Kingcombe ways of marketing, taking an interest in the most common-place things. For pervading everything was the consciousness, "It is *his* home I have to make comfortable." That thought sanctified and beautified all.

"You are quite right, my dear," said Harrie, pausing in her walk up and down, patting and singing to Baby, who stared with open eyes over her shoulder, and obstinately declined going to sleep. "You will turn out a notable woman, I see. It's a curious and melancholy fact, which we don't ever learn till we are married, that all the love in the world is thrown away upon a man unless you make him comfortable at home. A neat house and a creditable dinner every day go more to his heart than all the sentimental devotion you can give. It's all very well for a man in love to live upon roses

and posies, and kisses and blisses, but after he is married he dearly likes to be comfortable."

Agatha was silent for a moment, hardly venturing to believe, and yet afraid she must. "I heard Miss Valery once say that no man's love after marriage is exactly as it was before it; that the thing attained soon loses its preciousness, and that the wife has to assume a new character, and win another kind of love. I wonder if this is true. I wonder" — and suddenly she changed her seriousness for the tone of raillery she always used with Harrie Dugdale—"I wonder whether our husbands adore us first, and afterwards expect us to adore them."

"So they do; I assure you they do! And a pretty amount of adoring and waiting upon your husband will require. I wouldn't for the whole universe have my Duke such an awfully exacting, particular, provoking,



disagreeably good, or inexplicably naughty animal as my brother Nathanael."

"Mrs. Dugdale!" Agatha hardly knew whether to laugh or to be indignant. She only knew that she felt ready to spring up like a chained tigress when anybody said a word against Mr. Harper.

"There now, don't waken the baby. Keep yourself quiet, do. See, there's its husband coming down the street to comfort it. He is looking up here, too. Run down, do'ee now ; and if she'll be a good girl she shall havè the neatest household and the best husband in Kingcombe—always excepting mine."

Agatha did not run down ; but she leant over the landing, and heard the footsteps and voices in the hall—steps and voices which always seem to put new life into a house where its ruler is dear to the hearts of wife and children. Troubled as she was

—laden with even a new weight since the talk with Mrs. Dugdale—Agatha listened, and felt that in spite of all the house seemed brighter for the entrance of *her* husband. She tried to catch what he was saying, but only heard the voice of Mr. Dugdale.

“Of course, as you say, it's necessary. But really to-morrow—so soon—and for such a long time too! Couldn't both go together?”

Nathanael made some inaudible reply.

“To be sure, you know best. But—poor young thing!—I wonder what my Harrie would have said to me. Poor, pretty little thing!”

The words, the manner, startled Agatha; she could not make them out. She descended, looking alarmed, uneasy—a look which did not wear off all the rest of the evening. In leaving she wondered why Mr. Dugdale woke from his dreaminess to

bid her good-night with a fatherly air, addressing her more than once by his superlative of kindness, "My child." When she took her husband's arm to go out of the lighted hall into the night, Agatha trembled, as if something were going to happen—she knew not what.

The street was very dark, for Kingcombe people were economisers in gas; and besides kept such primitive hours, that at ten o'clock you might walk from one end of the town to the other and not see a light in any house. There was not a soul abroad except they two, and their feet echoed loudly along the pavement. At first Agatha, blinded by coming out of light into darkness, saw nothing, but stumbled on, clinging tightly to her husband. At length she perceived whereabouts they were—the black, quaintly-gabled houses, the market-cross, and, far above the sleepy town and its deserted streets, the bright, wonderfully bright stars.

Agatha took comfort when she saw the stars.

"Have we far to go? I am rather tired," she said to her husband, chiefly for the sake of saying something.

"Tired, are you? Then you must have a quiet day to-morrow. It will be very quiet, I doubt not;" and he sighed.

"Why so? What is to be done to-morrow? Shall you have to ride over to Thornhurst?"

"No; I saw Anne Valery yesterday. I shall not see her again for a good while."

"Indeed!"

"There is business requiring me in Cornwall. To-morrow I am going away."

"Going away!" The words were little more than a sigh. She felt all cold and numb, for the moment. Then a sudden flood of the old impetuous pride came over her. Going away! Leaving his young wife! Leaving her alone in her new home

—alone the second day, to be wondered at, and pointed at, and pitied! Perhaps he did it to humble and punish her. It was cruel—cruel! And again the demon or angel—which took such various forms that she hardly knew the true one—rose up rampant within her.

“Mr. Harper, this is sudden—will look strange. You ought to have told me before.”

“I did not know it myself until last night. That my going to Cornwall is necessary, on business grounds, I have already made clear to Marmaduke. He will tell his wife, and Harriet will tell all the world. I have so arranged that you will have no difficulty of any kind. This house will go on as usual, or you can visit at Thornhurst and at my father's. There will be no loss to you of anything or anybody—except one, whose absence must be welcome.”

“Welcome!” she repeated, in an accent of bitter scorn.

"You said so yourself. Hush! do not say it again. When we part, let it be in peace!"

He spoke in a smothered, exhausted voice, and holding the gate open for her to pass, leaned upon it as if he could hardly stand. But Agatha perceived nothing—she was dizzy and blind.

"Peace?" she repeated, driven mad by the mockery of the word. She saw the door half-open, the warm light glimmering within the hall—so soft—so home-like. The torture was too strong—her senses began to give way.

Without knowing what she did, without any settled purpose except to escape from the misery of that sight, Agatha pushed her husband from her, turned, and fled—fled anywhere, no matter where, so that it was into night and darkness, away from her home and from him.

She did not know the way ; she only knew that she ran up one street and down another like the wind. Her state of mind was bordering on insanity. At length she paused from sheer exhaustion, and leaned against a doorway—like any poor outraged, homeless wretch.

The good man of the house came softly out to look up into the quiet night before he bolted his door. He stood musing, contemplating the stars. It was a minute or more before he noticed the bowed human form beside him. When he did, there was no mistaking the compassionate voice.

“Eh, poor soul ! What’s wrong wi’ee ?”

Agatha sprang up with a cry. There were two standing by her, from whose presence she would gladly have run to the world’s end—Mr. Dugdale and her husband. The one remained petrified with astonishment—the other said but three words, in a

dull mechanical voice, as if every feeling had been struck out of the man by some thunder-bolt of doom.

“Agatha, come home.”

Again she tried to burst from him and fly, but her arm was caught, and Marmaduke Dugdale's grave look—the look he fixed upon his own children when they erred, constraining them always into repentance and goodness—was reading her inmost soul.

“Go home, poor child! I'll not tell of you or him. Go home with your husband.”

She felt her hand laid, or grasped—she knew not which—in that of Nathanael; who held it with invincible firmness. There was no resisting that clasp. She rose up and followed him as if led by an invisible chain. Her madness had passed, and left only a dull indifference to everything. The die was cast; she had laid open the miseries of their home, had disgraced him and herself before the world. It signified little where she went



or what she did ; they were utterly separated now.

Without again speaking, or taking notice of Mr. Dugdale, she suffered Nathanael to lead her away, passing swiftly down the silent streets. Neither husband nor wife uttered a single word.

The moment she entered the house she walked up-stairs, slowly, that he might not see her tottering ; went into her own room, and locked her door with a loud, fierce turning of the key, that seemed to shriek as it turned.

There, for almost an hour, she sat motionless. The maid, half asleep, came to the door with a light, but Agatha bade her set it down, and sat in the dark. Dark—altogether dark, within and without ; with no hope or repentance, or even the heroism of suffering ; wrathful, sullen, miserable ; wronged—yet conscious that she had sinned as much as she was sinned against ; seeing her husband and

herself stand as it were on either edge of a black gulf, hourly widening, yet neither having strength to plunge it to the other's side.

Here she sat, upright and still, body and soul wrapped in a leaden, shroud-like darkness, until gradually a stupor possessed her brain.

"I am so tired," she murmured, "I must go to sleep. He will not leave till to-morrow. But it does not signify. Nothing signifies. I must go to sleep."

She unlocked the door and drew in the candle, flaring in its socket. She had to press her fingers on her eyeballs before they could bear the light, all was so very dark. She knotted her hair up anyhow, took off her clothes, and crept to bed, almost as if she were creeping to her tomb. The fragment of candle went out, sinking instantaneously, like a soul quenched out of existence, and all was total darkness. In that darkness a heavy

hand seemed to lay itself on Agatha's brain, and press down her eyelids. Scarcely two minutes after, she was asleep.

Hour after hour of the night went by, and there not a sound, not a breath in the room. The late moon rose, and gave a little glimmer of light through the curtains. Now and then there was a faint noise of some one moving in the house, but Agatha never stirred. She slept heavily, as some people invariably sleep under the pressure of great pain.

Towards morning, when moonlight and dawn were melted together, and the room was growing light enough to discern faces, there was a step at the door, and a ray flashing through the opening, for Agatha had left it ajar.

Nathanael set down the candle without, and came in softly. He was dressed for a journey—evidently just ready to start. He looked very ill, sleepless, and worn.

Standing a minute at the door, he listened

to his wife's breathing, low and regular as that of a child. Nature and repose had soothed her; she slept now as quietly and healthfully as if she had never known trouble. Her husband crept across the room very carefully, and remained watching her. Oh! the contrast between the one who watched and the one who slept!

At first he stood perfectly upright, rigid, and motionless. Then his hands twisted themselves together, and his eyes grew hot, bursting. His lips moved as in speaking, though with never a sound. It was the dumbness—the choking dumbness of that emotion which made it so terrible. Such silence could not last—he seemed to feel it could not—and so moved backward out of hearing. There he stood for a little while, leaning against the wall, his hand bound tightly over his forehead, and sighing, so awfully sighing!—that gasp which bursts from men who have no tears.



At length he became calmer, but still stood without the door. He even moved the candle further off, as though afraid its glare might disturb the sleeper—forgetful that the room was now growing all bright with daybreak. At this moment the clock striking in the hall below made him start at its warning.

Hastily he took out a paper that he had hid somewhere about him. It was in his own handwriting, all sealed and endorsed, "Not to be opened except in case of my death." Nevertheless he tore it open—tore likewise an under-cover addressed to his wife, and began to read :

*"I know you never loved me. From something I overheard on our marriage-day—from other words afterwards let fall in anger by my brother, I also know that you loved——"*

He crushed the paper furiously, his eyes seeming literally to flame. Then all the fury died out of them, and left nothing but tender-

ness. He listened for the soft breathing within—soft and pure.

“No !” he murmured. “I will not leave her honour to the chance of written words. No other human being must ever know what I knew. If I live, it is not worse than it was before ; and should any harm come to me, let her think I died in ignorance. Better so.”

He tore the paper into small strips, and deliberately burnt them one by one in the candle, making a little pile of the ashes, but afterwards scattering them about the fire-place. Then putting out the light—for the house was now filled with the soft grey dawn—Nathanael stepped once more into his wife's room.

And still she was sleeping—sleeping at the very crisis of her fate. Her face was composed and sweet, though her hands were still clenched, and one of them almost buried in her loose hair.

Her husband stood and looked at her,

trying long to keep himself firm and self-restrained, as though she were aware of his presence. But at last the holy helplessness of sleep subdued him. From standing upright he *sank* gradually down—down—till he was crouching on his knees. Shudder over shudder came over him—sigh after sigh rose up, and was smothered again in his breast. At last even the strong man's strength gave way, and there fell a heavy, silent, burning rain.

And all the while the wife slept, and never knew how he loved her!

After a while the fiery dews ceased. Nathanael opened his eyes and tried to look once more calmly on his wife. She stirred a little in her sleep, and began to smile—a very soft, meek, innocent smile, that softened her proud lips into infantine sweetness. She was again Agatha, the merry Agatha, as she had been when he first saw her, before he wooed her, and shook her roughly from her girlish calm



into all the struggles of life. He could have cursed himself—and yet—yet he loved her!

Kneeling, he stretched his arm over her neck. Another moment and he would have yielded to the frantic impulse, and snatched her to his heart for one—just one embrace—heedless of her waking. But how would she wake? only to hate and reproach him. He had better leave her thus, and carry away in his remembrance that picture of peace, which blotted out all her bitter words, all her cruel want of love—made him forget everything except that she had been the wife of his bosom and his first love.

He drew back his arm, gradually and noiselessly. He did not attempt to kiss her, not even her hand, lest he should disturb her; but kneeling, laid his head on the pillow by hers, and pressed his lips to her hair.

“I am glad she sleeps—yes, very glad! She is quite content now, she will be quite

happy when I am gone. God love thee and take care of thee—my darling—my Agatha.”

With this sigh on his heart, though his lips scarcely stirred, he kissed her hair once again, rose up, and went softly away.

As he departed, the first sunbeam came in and danced upon the bed, showing Agatha fast sleeping, sleeping still. She never woke until it had been broad day for a long time, and the sun creeping over her pillow struck her eyes.

Then she started up with a loud cry—she had been dreaming. Tears were wet upon her cheek. She called wildly for her husband. It was too late.

He had been gone at least three hours.

END OF VOL. II.

---

WHITING, BEAUFORT HOUSE, STRAND.





BOUND BY  
BONE & SON,  
—  
76, FLEET STREET,  
LONDON.



